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**Keishi Ayasato**

Illustration by  
**Saki Ukai**

# Torture Princess

◆ Fremd Torturchen ◆



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# Torture Princess

Fremd Torturchen



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An anime-style illustration of a young woman with long, flowing blonde hair styled in two braids. She has red eyes and is wearing a light-colored, ruffled dress with a dark sash. She is standing on a dark, gothic architectural structure, possibly a balcony or a bridge, with a large, ornate metal cage or gate in the foreground. The background is dark and filled with dense foliage and mechanical gears. Red blood splatters are visible on the ground and the cage. The overall mood is dark and dramatic.

“O Sinless Soul,  
who bears the  
name of Kaiser.

From this day  
forth, act as my  
loyal servant.”

Jeanne de Bais ♦









"You chose to become  
the enemy of humanity,  
Kaito! You chose that  
path yourself, bearing  
sins you had no  
business bearing!"

That being the case, hurry  
up and present me your  
neck already!"

"Screw that nonsense! And screw dying!  
Just listen to me, Elisabeth!"







## ◆◆◆◆ The Butcher's Diary

Clear weather, rather chilly, and nary a demon battle in sight, I do say.

Ever since the battle against the fourteen demons ended, Madam Elisabeth's spirits have seemed rather low. After finishing up some business here and there, I came rushing gallantly over, only to find her loafing atop her bed again. And the castle is oh-so-very quiet. I daresay it makes me wax nostalgic for the days that passed us by not long ago. I was rather fond of how she exclaimed "'Tis delicious!" Ms. Lovely Maid's cooking was splendid as well, and dim-witted as Mr. Dim-Witted Servant may have been, I certainly didn't dislike how kind he was. It's a secret among secrets, but it's as true as true can be. I admit that I constantly speak in idle gossip, but I occasionally speak truths, as well. Or rather, I've never once told a lie in my life! Ahem, ahem!

But now Mr. Dim-Witted Servant and Ms. Lovely Maid have gone missing.

When such a thing as that happens, it really does make one wonder if the world will last another day, doesn't it?

At the very least, I hope that my acquaintances will be able to keep on smiling for as long as possible.

Today's menu ..... Troll arm, dragon tail, and all sorts of other things.  
Madam Elisabeth's reaction ..... I haven't started cooking yet, but I'm sure she'll weep tears of joy.  
Today's Mr. Dim-Witted Servant ..... Where in the world could he be?  
Today's Mr. Dim-Witted Servant 2 ..... Well, I have my suspicions.  
Both Kaito and I are wishing for you to awaken soon.









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4

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◆ Fremd Torturchen ◆

**YEN  
ON**  
New York





## Copyright

Translation by Nathaniel Hiroshi Thrasher

Cover art by Saki Ukai

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## Elisabeth Le Fanu

The Torture Princess. A beautiful woman who massacred her people, her acts of torture even extending to the nobles. She is set to be executed. Had been ordered by the Church to punish those who contracted with demons and told "Before the day of your death, try to do some good at least." After the subjugation of the fourteen demons, she was given a new order: to kill Kaito for going against humanity.

## Hina

An automaton maid once built by Vlad. Kaito's eternal lover, companion, soldier, weapon, love toy, sex doll, and bride. After the subjugation of the fourteen demons, she opposed humanity alongside Kaito in order to stop Elisabeth's execution and is currently acting as his wife and spending her life on the run with him.

## Izabella Vicker

Current commander of the Holy Knights. Possesses powerful mana, a gallant spirit, and a deft sword arm. She lost her brother at the Plain of Skewers. Fought alongside Kaito and Elisabeth to drive back the Monarch, the Grand Monarch, and the King in the capital. While she puts her job first, she also holds some affection for Kaito and co.

## The Kaiser

With the advice and aid of the soul replica that Vlad left behind, Kaito summoned the strongest of the fourteen ranked demons once more. The Kaiser has taken an interest in Vlad and Kaito, calling the former "He Who Rears Hell Within His Mind" and the latter "Accumulation of Seventeen Years' Pain." Has a short temper and a great deal of pride.

# Characters

## Vlad Le Fanu

The creator of the Torture Princess. Elisabeth's self-proclaimed father. Had formed a contract with the Kaiser, the strongest of the fourteen ranked demons, but was subjugated by Elisabeth. At present, a replica of his soul is assisting Kaito. Treats Kaito as his successor.

## Fiore

Contractor to the Grand King. She'd known Vlad since before they made their demonic contracts. Long ago, the two of them would liven up balls together. Although she backed Elisabeth into a corner with her ability to use the hearts of demons to cast Sacrifice, she, too, was subjugated.

## Diablo

An entity that exists to destroy the world, as it was created by God. While Diablo normally resides in a higher dimension and is unable to interfere with the world of man, numerous catastrophes were caused by the fourteen contractors. Is composed of fourteen ranked demons: the Knight, the Governor, the Grand Governor, the Earl, the Grand Earl, the Duke, the Grand Duke, the Marquis, the Grand Marquis, the Monarch, the Grand Monarch, the King, the Grand King, and the Kaiser. Their contractors obtain immense power but lose their human forms in exchange. They should have all been subjugated, but...?

## Kaito Sena

A young man, brutally killed after a life of abuse. He was summoned by Elisabeth and made to work as her servant. Due to his experiences in life, strong emotions such as fear, anger, and hatred cause him to become unusually calm. After the subjugation of the fourteen demons, he chose to become humanity's enemy as the Kaiser's new contractor in order to stop Elisabeth's execution.

## The Butcher

A demi-human with chicken-like feet. Wears a black cloak and carries around a bloodstained sack. Nobody has ever seen what's inside the sack. Can obtain any type of meat for you, no matter what it may be. Elisabeth often purchases organs from him. Has no interest in anything besides meat, and thinks about nothing else...or so he says.

## Clueless Ray Faund

A member of the Church, and a fanatic who abhors heresy. Under the unique belief that "for God's ends, we should use even demons," he came into contact with the Kaiser. By feeding the Kaiser information, he obtained great power. However, he failed to assassinate Elisabeth and had the tables turned on him. He released the Kaiser and sought his aid but was killed instead.

## Jeanne de Rais

A young girl who calls herself a saint, a whore, and a Torture Princess. Could she be the maiden of salvation?





To the  
Ignorant  
Faithful

F r e e m d T o r l o r c h e n





## **To the Ignorant Faithful**

Pray, O ye faithful. Pray that our Lord's benevolence may be upon us.

Pray that, in His unfathomable love, He will heal this scarred world of ours.

As you are all aware, the battle against the fourteen demons has come to an end. And in its wake, the fifteenth demon and its contractor have appeared and declared their animosity toward us. The paladins are currently in pursuit of this contractor. But what we need now face, above all else, are the harsh wounds we bear.

The dead are countless, and the suffering has been immeasurable.

Untold numbers of the innocent and the pious alike have fallen victim. With the Saint's guidance, they now rest at God's side. But the grief our people feel is profound, and their lamentations are endless.

It is in these trying times that I would ask you to hark back to the first miracle.

The Saint carried God into our world. And once He rebuilt our scarred world, she fell into a deep slumber.

It follows that our entire lives were built upon her suffering, upon the sacrifice she made. We must take care to respect her, to revere God, to cleanse ourselves, and to live righteously.

With how many are falling victim, as though the tale of old is being recreated, doing so is more important than ever.

Carrying on upon land ravaged by demons is no mean feat. Thankfully, due to its unforeseen strength, the Capital was able to escape total destruction. But even so, living with such disgraceful scars is a task far too hopeless, and far too unpleasant.

So pray, all of you. Implore Him, all of you.

Believe in His compassion, seek out His love, and pray for a miracle.

Our Lord may be distant, but the Saint is close at hand.

We must humbly pray, wishing for a miracle like that of old.

We must pray that she remains boundlessly compassionate.

But even as you all pray, you remain unaware.

Incapable of understanding.

Incapable of understanding that a true miracle is a miracle precisely because it occurs.

Come now, O ye ignorant faithful. Pray that God will be your Savior.

For the beginning, the middle, and the end all lie in the palm of His hand.

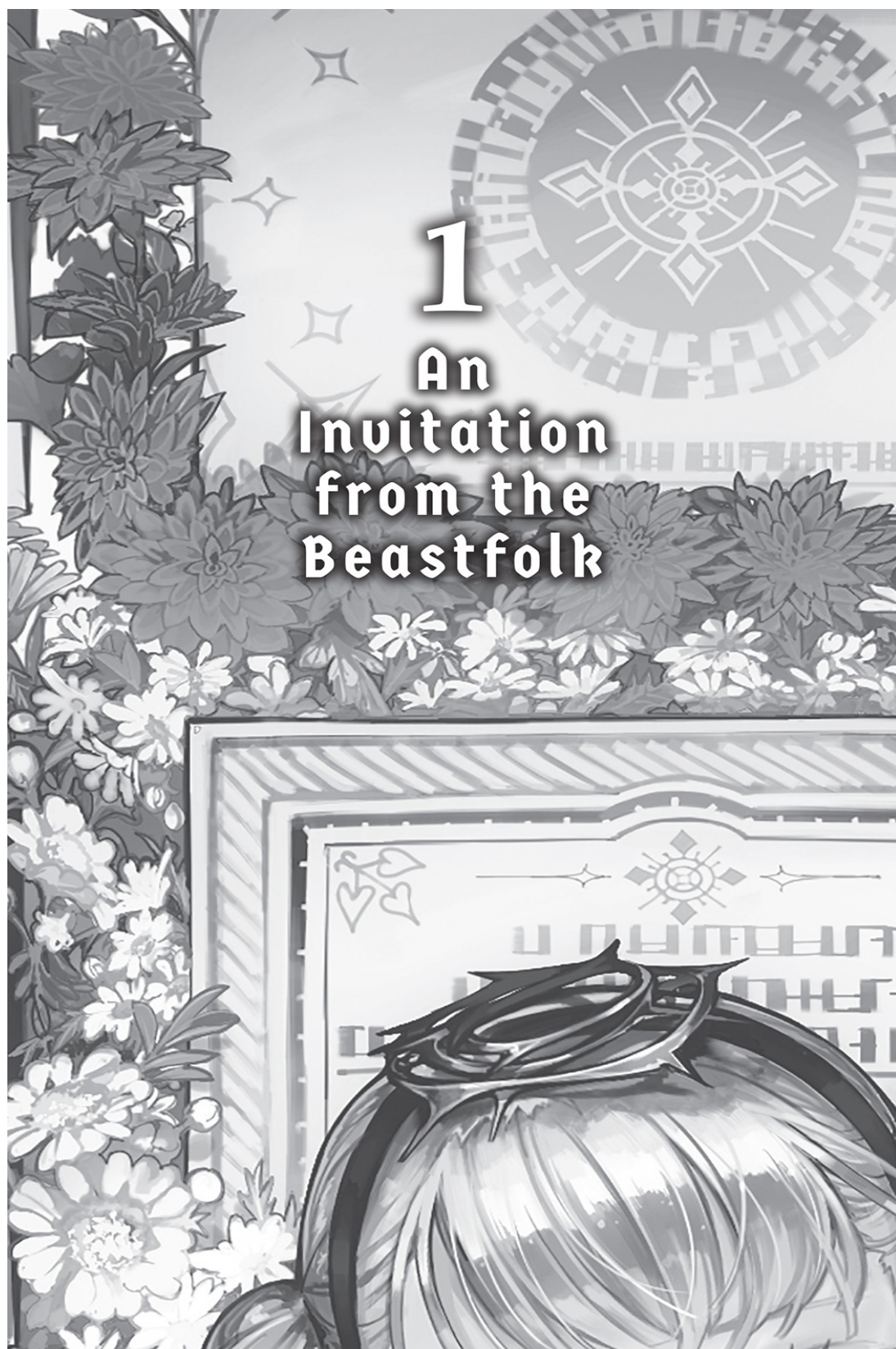
# The Butcher

A demi-human with chicken-like feet. He wears a black cloak and carries around a blood-stained sack. Nobody has ever seen what's inside the sack. He can obtain any type of meat for you, no matter what it may be. Elisabeth often purchases organs from him. Has no interest in anything other than meat, and thinks about nothing else...or so he says.









F r e a m d T o r t u r c h e n





# 1

## An Invitation from the Beastfolk

A few days ago, the Monarch, the Grand Monarch, and the King had fused into a mass of flesh and attacked the Capital, dealing it a fatal blow. Humanity had narrowly defeated them, though, finally ending the menace the fourteen demons had posed.

As proof of that, and to exemplify the conclusion of mankind's nightmare, the Church had announced that an execution would be carried out.

Elisabeth Le Fanu, the Torture Princess and a peerless sinner, would be symbolically burned at the stake.

People had crowded around the execution site in order to catch a glimpse of that historic moment. Ultimately, the death sentence was put on hold.

The reason being that a new demon and contractor had loudly declared war on humanity.

In the end, the curtain had not fallen on mankind's nightmare.

And so the Torture Princess, having escaped the stake, began her demon subjugation anew on the Church's orders.

As for her current status, she was in her castle, asleep.

It was still early in the afternoon. In other words, she was enjoying a leisurely afternoon nap.

Elisabeth was lying down with her eyes closed, surrounded by stone walls and atop a well-made yet simple bed.

She looked almost like a lovely Sleeping Beauty. However, she wasn't even slightly drowsy. The fact that her lips were pursed and her eyebrows occasionally twitched in frustration made it obvious.

Without warning, a strange noise rang out, and a white orb came hurtling through the broken shutters of the room's window.

The Church's communication device was emitting a shrill noise.

*Screeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeech! Crack!*

The next moment, a swirling vortex of darkness and crimson flower petals appeared out of thin air, only for a whip to emerge from within it to strike the noisy intruder. The sphere took a sudden nosedive until Elisabeth extended a hand and caught it.

As the wings on the orb's sides gently drooped, a huge number of glyphs flashed across its surface.

After she read its contents, Elisabeth quickly sat up.

"Good work."

With that, she nodded and hurled the orb away. It went flying out the window.

Elisabeth clapped her hands together, then murmured in displeasure.

"I see... Hmph, showing our face rather frequently now, aren't we? Amateur."

Following that remark, she reached her hand out into empty space. Darkness and crimson petals swirled once more. Elisabeth withdrew a serrated knife designed for torture from within, then tossed it forward.

*Thunk!*

The knife firmly planted itself into both the wall and the map affixed to it.

The map was already riddled with knives. Each time the Church sent her information regarding sightings of a particular individual, she'd stabbed the map in the corresponding location. The arrangement of the knives was beginning to reveal a definite pattern to the sightings, one that likely not even the fugitive in question was aware of.

Elisabeth gazed at the map with her dark, crimson eyes. Then she opened her shapely mouth to speak.

The voice that came out of it was alarmingly hollow.

"Worry not, Kaito. Your days of bearing sins and being loathed by the world shall not be many."

Suddenly, a tired smile made its way across her face.

Her voice was dry, yet full of pity as well.

"For soon, I will come to put you down myself."

A heavy silence fell over the room. Snorting, Elisabeth lay back down on the bed.

She closed her eyes once more, but she tossed and turned restlessly, unable to find sleep. Eventually, covering her eyes with her arms, she ground her teeth as she whispered.

"'Tis quiet... Too quiet."

Silence pervaded her castle.

There was no obnoxious voice asking her why the hell she was sleeping.

And there was no charming call, telling her it was time for tea, either.

That was only natural.

It would have been far stranger for there to be anyone eccentric enough to willingly talk to the Torture Princess.

Consequently, she was completely and utterly alone.



*"Ah, achoo!"*

"Ha, Master Kaito sneezed! How adorable! Or rather, are you all right? Have you caught a cold?"

"Um, y'know, I don't think golem bodies can get sick. Maybe someone's talking about me behind my back?"

Completely unfazed, Kaito rubbed his nose. Without a moment's delay, Hina pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket and gently pressed it against his face.

"All right, Master Kaito—blow!"

"Thanks, Hina. I'll wash it and give it back, *achoo!*"

Kaito sneezed once more. Quickly folding up the handkerchief, Hina passionately clenched her fists.

"I think not! I will be taking this handkerchief, along with the memory of your delightfully adorable sneeze, and storing it in my treasured Master Kaito Collection as Collection Number 1983!"

"That's gonna be a no. C'mon, give it here."

"Never! Ahem. With all due respect, is this not but a meager request from your loving wife—eek, I said 'wife'! Shall I bat my eyelashes?"

"Even being my wife doesn't make it okay. You can't keep it!"

"Master Kaito, you meanie!"

Hina puffed up her cheeks. "Making a cute face isn't going to suddenly make it okay," said Kaito as he took the handkerchief from her hand.

A mass of people was passing by as the two of them went through their inane exchange. The makeup of the crowds was truly varied, from their occupations and social statuses to their races. There were townsfolk and merchants, sailors and laborers, magical beast demolishers, demi-humans, and beastfolk. It was no wonder—the town was built at the intersection of two large rivers, serving as both a mooring place for ships and a hub for regional commerce.

Due to the diversity of the merchants and the sheer number of people, their surroundings were quite lively.

Stalls lined both sides of the road, and the busy sounds of trade filled the air. Although it looked like your run-of-the-mill market, this place had one special trait. No permit was required to sell by the roadside, nor were there restrictions on what could be sold. Perhaps it was because no one had to fear random inspections conducted by soldiers, but despite the dubious public order, the whole town was as animated as its inhabitants.

Even so, if one strained their ears, they could make out disquieting rumors.

"What, that old man? He went to the Capital. No matter how much building material ya bring up there, it's never enough."

"We're in bad shape here. Our client went under, you see... No, as in, literally went *under*. All the apprentices got swallowed up by that mass of flesh. I still can't believe it myself... What about you? I hear the apothecaries got hit real hard."

"It was a real piece of work. And it isn't just the apothecaries. Everything just keeps getting more expensive. And who knows how long it'll take before things settle down...or how many people'll string themselves up before then."



A few days ago, the demons had invaded the Capital. The attack had been nothing short of devastating. Due to how concentrated the population was, the death toll had been immense. Many buildings with historical value had been destroyed. The main marketplace and the factories had been annihilated, too, in addition to the losses of various storehouses, transportation systems and communication devices, and many other essentials. The monetary damages had been incalculable.





And it hadn't just affected the Capital—the surrounding regions accepting the massive influx of refugees were showing signs of financial strain as well. The labor shortages were becoming problematic, while the stability of the food supply was constantly in question. The damage to the nation's economic and political center had cast a grave shadow over the lives of its people.

The current situation filled Kaito with sorrow. The conversation bubbling up around him continued to reach his ears.

"We don't have enough workers to go around. But none of these refugees are taking any jobs. The Church says they're working on it, but I dunno. The Capital itself has the paladins watching over things, so it's doing all right, but everywhere else is in shambles."

"They keep demanding more mercenaries, huh? They still haven't caught the Kaiser's contractor?"

Kaito and Hina instinctively exchanged a glance. Then they quickly distanced themselves from the marketplace.

After all, the Kaiser's contractor in question was none other than Kaito himself.

The two of them were currently fugitives.

Of course, there was a profound reason behind that.

Once, after a lifetime of abuse at the hands of his father, Kaito had been killed. Following his death, Kaito's soul had been summoned to another world, where he obtained a new life. And the one who'd summoned him had been none other than the Torture Princess, Elisabeth Le Fanu, a sinner fated to be executed after fulfilling her duty of killing fourteen demons.

Together with Kaito, the Torture Princess slew the demons who'd attacked the Capital, successfully completing the mission handed down to her by the Church. Having finally atoned for her crimes, she was supposed to have been burned at the stake. But Kaito refused to accept the Torture Princess's fate. Accompanied by the Kaiser, whom he'd formed a contract with, Kaito turned against humanity. As the fifteenth demonic contractor, he'd loudly announced his intent to become a villain to the entire Capital.

All that had been for the sake of granting humanity a new enemy and convincing the Church to postpone Elisabeth's execution.

This was how Kaito had come to shoulder the heavy burden of sin, now hated by all and on the run.

And as for Kaito and Hina's current status, they were gathering provisions.

It was a trifling, obvious task. But the fact of the matter was that people needed to eat.

Kaito had yet to fully fuse with his demon. As such, he still required nutrients to survive. But serious obstacles stood in the way of his and Hina's desire to procure a steady supply of food. First, the town's food situation was strained because the supply lines had been thrown into disarray. But



more importantly, Kaito's left arm had assumed a beastly form, causing him to stand out considerably. The obvious solution would have been to ask Hina to buy what they needed, but her striking silver hair, emerald-green eyes, and miraculous beauty made that less than ideal.

Of course, Kaito wasn't at a complete loss. The first time they confronted this problem, he'd turned to Vlad, who was ostensibly his teacher when it came to matters of magic.

*"Shapeshifting, disguises, or invisibility spells, you say... Ha, how mundane! You know, I once had a device that could stop time, which would have easily prevented anyone from ever catching you. Back when I was alive, you see, I wasn't particularly keen on surprise attacks. I would instead spearhead my demonic troops and boldly launch grand invasions. In short, my dear successor, I'm afraid I can't be of much help. I never took it upon myself to even learn such uninspired spells in the first place!"*

*Well, he sure was completely useless.*

Kaito dejectedly thought back to the pose Vlad had struck as he'd answered the question with a finger pressed against the side of his head. The stone in his pocket containing Vlad's soul—or rather, a replica thereof—rattled around. He seemed to have sensed the slight against him and was protesting. But Kaito merely ignored him.

*Well, at least I was able to cobble something together, in the end.*

Kaito let out a sigh as he adjusted the bit where the black cloak covering his head and body had slipped down.

At the moment, Kaito and Hina were taking after the Butcher and concealing their faces behind black cloaks. It was a simple method, and one that would normally make them look rather conspicuous. However, there was no shortage of people in this town involved in illicit business, making their choice of attire quite common.

Somehow managing to avoid being noticed, the two of them turned their attention to their shopping.

"Should we check out that one next?"

"Okay!"

Nodding in agreement, Hina walked up to the fruit stand. There she found a basket left directly atop the cobbled pavement, and she pulled an orange out from it. Or rather, she pulled something that looked like an orange from it, although it might have been an entirely different fruit altogether.

After checking to make sure it had no serious bruises and hadn't been chewed through by worms, she turned back toward Kaito.

"Is this acceptable?"

"Looks good to me. Let's grab two of those... That, and two bags of dried figs, please."

"Comin' right up."

The wizened merchant took Kaito's order with a hoarse voice. Just as Kaito had suspected, the merchant didn't even glance at his customer,

simply bundling up the goods with practiced—albeit indifferent—movements. Kaito frowned as he handed over the payment. It was pricey, as was to be expected. But the price of commodities would probably only continue to rise.

*It's a good thing that Godd Deos was able to save the king and the bigwig aristocrats. The blame for most of society's woes will probably end up falling on me. The economic decline, the shortage of goods, and the disorder stemming from the apocalyptic despair will most likely continue for a long while, but they should all improve as the Capital recovers. I just hope that things won't get too bad before then...*

It wasn't only everyday folk who were feeling the squeeze; feudal lords, the representatives of the mercantile guilds, and the Church's high clergy were under a great deal of pressure as well. All sorts of people and organizations were going broke. But all Kaito could do was hope for them to hold on.

As Kaito became lost in thought, Hina stored the oranges in the magical leather bag they'd taken from the castle. The bag was already loaded up with bundles of rice and herbs, rock salt, a few days' worth of vegetables, and dried cheese.

"We should stock up on other stuff that'll keep well, like dried meat and fish."

"Understood. In that case, we should go there."

Hina nodded, leading the way to the shop two stalls over. It might have been the shopkeeper's seniority that made this booth noticeably nicer than any of the other offerings on the street. Slabs of meat hung from hooks affixed to its simple yet robust roof, and wooden wicker baskets lined the roadside in front of it. Chickens and ducks raised a loud clamor from within the cages. It seemed they were butchered beside the nearby well once purchased.

As they approached the shop, Kaito stopped in his tracks. Almost simultaneously, Hina quietly whispered to him.

"Master Kaito..."

"Don't worry. I noticed."

Kaito's response was concise. As they spoke, Hina stooped over and looked at the ducks, while Kaito stood stock-still behind her. Without once shifting their gazes, the two of them searched their surroundings.

At some point, a disquieting presence had become mixed in with the hustle and bustle.

Several gazes filled with tension, wariness, and unmistakable animosity were focused on the two of them.

Furthermore, they could hear a commotion starting up in the distance. Somebody was forcibly stopping the flow of pedestrians. Although Kaito and Hina couldn't see them yet, whoever the interlopers were, they were ignoring the protests of the people around them and trying to block off the street.

There could be no doubt that their objective was to apprehend the two fugitives.

Kaito shook his head slightly.

"I'll admit my disguise was pretty garbage, but still... They found us pretty damn fast, didn't they? What a pain."

"It was unavoidable. The bounty on your head is rather large, after all. We should be grateful that at least we aren't being ambushed by someone after they found out about the reward."

"Yeah... Things got pretty messy last time."

The two of them let out heavy sighs. The ducks kept on quacking.

At the same time, the crowd began to stir.

A group of armored men were approaching, violently pushing through the crowd. One of them shoved aside a drunkard, who pitched forward and tumbled to the ground. Their determined advance toppled over a handcart full of bouquets, too. An emaciated dog barked as it fled.

A chain of furious protests rang out. The band of warriors didn't even spare the angry crowd a glance as they encircled Kaito and Hina.

The tension was so thick that you could cut it with a knife. Everyone waited with bated breath to see what would happen.

Completely oblivious to the situation, a shopkeeper-like man emerged from the back of the stall, flourishing a meat cleaver.

"What's all this ruckus, some kinda fight? I don't care who's in the right, but I'll take the side of a pretty lady any day, my dear!"

"Ah, I happen to be married, so please don't mind me. My deepest apologies for the trouble."

With a quick bow, Hina drew away from the storefront. "And I'm her lucky husband," said Kaito as he embraced her without missing a beat. With a sidelong glance, he confirmed who their pursuers were.

Leading the group were a few paladins from the Church's local branch office. Everyone else in their party looked weak, both in posture and in build. It didn't look like there were any mages or priests, even among the lookouts.

In spite of himself, Kaito felt let down. He shook his head a little.

*As soon as they rushed at us all frantic-like, I had a feeling they weren't any run-of-the-mill group.*

"Man, they made the wrong choice."

"Indeed, that they did."

"Seriously."

Kaito and Hina nodded at each other. Throughout their whole exchange, the paladins continued closing the distance.

Kaito squinted. The paladins' silver suits of armor lacked their usual luster, and their gaits were sluggish. It looked like they'd been negligent in their daily training, not to mention failing to take good care of their armor. Despite the town's size, being transferred here probably amounted to a demotion, and their days had likely been spent idly.

The man who appeared to be their leader raised an annoyed voice, one altogether lacking in zeal.

"You're Kaito Sena, correct?"

"...Try to keep your foolishness in check, if you don't mind."

"Not planning on giving a straight answer, you bastard?!"

The man reached his arm out, his voice filled with pent-up rage. He grabbed Kaito's shoulder and gave it a yank. Kaito turned around with little resistance. Upon seeing his face, the man gave a short gulp.

Kaito wore a wicked grin, one wholly befitting the Kaiser.

"To think someone would dare to go up against me with such shabby men and arms."

Kaito's voice was as cold as ice. The paladin went pale.

The situation would quickly deteriorate if the man was allowed to scream. Not wanting to provoke the crowd more than necessary, Kaito quickly set into motion. He reached into the pocket opposite the one where he kept Vlad's stone and pulled out a fragment of a jewel.

A blue flash lit up the cobbled road. As it did, Kaito snapped his fingers.

*"La (activate)."*

The jewel fragment burst from within.

Azure light and black feathers surged up all around them. The two stark colors violently swallowed up Kaito, Hina, and all the nearby paladins. Against the backdrop of the terrified cries of bystanders and livestock, the azure and black wound together in a swirling eddy of magic.

Then, with a small popping noise, they vanished.

*Clap, clap.*

The soles of his leather shoes audibly struck the ground as Kaito landed.

Then he looked down at his surroundings from atop the ruined hill.

This was the location where the Torture Princess had fought the Duke and eventually burned him to death.

Kaito had traveled to that hill in the blink of an eye.

The jewel fragment was a magical teleportation device. By releasing the magic sealed within it, the user could instantly travel to a location where another fragment from the same jewel was buried.

Kaito had taken an old jewel from Elisabeth's castle and, under Vlad's tutelage, had used blood and pain as an intermediary to infuse it with mana for this purpose. Now that he thought about it, Vlad technically had been useful in getting out of their most recent jam.

Moments later, Hina touched down beside him. On the other hand, the paladins failed to stick their landings and ended up tumbling down the slope. One of them stepped on something dry, then screamed.

"Wh-what is this place?!"

Human bones lay scattered atop the hillside.

Due to their fierce battle against the Duke, the land here had been churned up, and many of the coffins resting in the earth had been destroyed.



"Looks like they're all here."

Kaito murmured quietly as the confusion and screams continued.

There was a reason he'd specifically chosen to come all the way to this distant place. Due to the Duke's horrid deeds, the whole region had been deemed corrupted and subsequently sealed off without exception.

In other words, as long as they were here, there was no need to worry about unrelated people getting involved.

"Now then, I'd better do something to reward your foolhardy valor!"

Kaito gave a loud shout. He grabbed the black cloak he was wearing and forcefully hurled it away.

His black outfit, resembling a military uniform with its bloodred embroidery, came into view.

Then the wanted sinner made a grand declaration.

"As the Kaiser's contractor, and as the enemy of all mankind, I shall be your opponent."



Over the past few days, Kaito had quickly come to a number of realizations.

First, hitting people with the back of his sword was surprisingly difficult.

And second, trying to strike fear into people's hearts while taking care not to leave any lasting effects was quite the task.

"Killing one of them by accident would be an absolute mess. Definitely wouldn't be able to undo something like that."

"Good work out there! The way you fought was most befitting the ultimate personification of evil, yet at the same time, completely gentlemanly! A splendid job once more! I'm going faint, and my heart is pounding, and I'm head over heels in love with you!"

"Your praise makes it all worth it."

"Eek, Master Kaito, you're so cool!" shrieked Hina as she hopped up and down.

Kaito acknowledged her reaction with a raised hand. Their pursuers had fallen into heaps on the ground in front of them, all of them fully unconscious. However, none of them had sustained any serious injuries. Once they woke up, they'd be able to descend the hill and call for help on their own. They might find themselves assailed by nightmares for a few days, though.

*They'd better, or I'm in trouble.*

Kaito looked down at his downed foes with a serious look on his face.

After all, he needed the people to continue believing that Kaito Sena was the enemy of mankind.

Given his position, he couldn't content himself with a simple life on the run. His goal was to stave off Elisabeth's execution. To that end, he needed the Church to keep believing he was a serious threat to humanity.

Each time he took down a would-be pursuer, he made sure to take every chance he got to etch unforgettable fear into them. Fortunately, none of their pursuers had been particularly strong, possibly because the Capital was preoccupied with its own defenses or for some other pressing reason. But Kaito was well aware of the fact that he wouldn't be able to keep up the farce forever.

*Pretty soon, I'm gonna hit my limit.*

Before that happened, he needed to figure out a way to have Elisabeth's execution called off.

And more than anything, he needed to change her mind.

*I still can't think of any way to do that.*

The Torture Princess's sins were far too severe. No matter what justifications she may have had, she could never take back the things she'd done. There was no way she could possibly atone enough to make up for it. Short of changing the past, there was no way to erase the sins she'd committed.

The people she'd killed were never coming back. Kaito knew that, and so did Elisabeth herself.

Kaito closed his eyes, puzzling over what in the world he could possibly do. Then a deep voice rang out.

*"You truly are a hopeless, pitiable fool."*

"Kaiser."

The voice was inaudible to any but Kaito, his contractor, and it replied to him with humanlike laughter.

With his magnificent canine body still hidden, the Kaiser went on.

*"Indeed, O contractor of mine. It is I, a flawless hound wholly wasted on an unworthy master such as yourself. How many times must you repeat this foolery before you're satisfied? The matter should be simple. All you need do is make good on your proclamation at the Capital and amass power by gathering the pain of others in a manner befitting my master. Then you could simply destroy the foundations of this world and reshape it as you desire."*

"How many times do I have to tell you? I have no plans to tyrannize anyone. I'm not gonna become like my father."

*"Ha, a brute that looks down on brutes. That in itself is laughable. What difference is there between one brand of evil and another?"*

The Kaiser scoffed, and Kaito narrowed his eyes a little. It was true; considering his current position in a vacuum, he was far more deserving of the descriptor *evil* than his father ever had been.

He was the enemy of mankind, after all.

Amused in spite of himself by that fact, Kaito was ready to respond.

"Ha-ha, you have a point there... But you gotta understand, Kaiser, it'd be a waste of time for me to try to amass power by hurting people. There's not a doubt in my mind that Elisabeth would come barreling in and murder me the moment I tried."

*"But at this rate, you'll find your head removed from your shoulders regardless. How shameful, how utterly shameful. Dying, no matter how it happens, is a disgrace. It follows, then, that you should give in to your deepest desires and try fighting like you really mean it."*

The Kaiser's words were to the point. Kaito nodded. It was exactly like the Kaiser had told him once before.

The power of demons was supreme, and could first be attained when one extended their hand past the limits of avarice and desire. And one who forgot their greatest wish was naught but a fool masquerading as a saint.

*Even so, I'm not going to betray Neue.*

Kaito thought back to the boy who'd sacrificed himself for Kaito and been eaten by the Earl's spider. The boy's existence was like a knot tied around Kaito's heart, stopping him from crossing that final line.

He refused to do anything that would cause others to have to sacrifice themselves the same way he had been saved. And he couldn't bear the thought of becoming a thug who just grinned as they tormented the weak, like his father had done.

But at the moment, he had something far more important to do than respond to the Kaiser.

"So what brings you guys here?"

Kaito called out, his voice ringing with confidence. However, he received no reply. Nevertheless, he leveled a cool gaze toward the shadows behind the gravestones and the shattered coffins. Perhaps shaken by the intensity of his confidence, the air shifted a little.

Immediately after they'd teleported, he had noticed a few presences who'd come along, following the traces of his mana.

Hina had noticed at the same time he had, or perhaps even earlier. But when he cast a sidelong glance at her, he saw that she wasn't holding her halberd at the ready.

She was simply waiting to spot movement and taking care to avoid putting the other party on guard.

*Yeah, that's the right call.*

After all, Kaito couldn't sense a shred of hostility from their new pursuers.

What were they doing? What was their goal?

As he concealed his bewilderment, Kaito continued staring at the spot where the newcomers were lurking.

Having run out of patience, a few figures finally made their appearances. Just like the set of pursuers prior to them, they were clad in full-body armor. However, the material differed from that of the paladins and Royal Knights, making use not just of metal but of leather and scales as well. Their outfits had a vermilion motif and gave off a unique aesthetic and cultural impression.

But what surprised Kaito the most was their faces.

"...Beastfolk?"

Their new pursuers were not, in fact, human.

They all had animal heads, their bodies were covered in dense-looking fur, and their feet were adorned with pointy claws.

Kaito recalled what Elisabeth had once told him.

*"Demi-human-beastfolk crossbreeds. Not an uncommon sight, particularly with the influx of various races in low-class towns. They make up about thirty percent of slum dwellers, and in the north, it exceeds forty percent. Visibly pure-blooded demi-humans and beastfolk are generally in the nobility, though, so they're rarely seen in human settlements."*

Kaito looked over the beastfolk before him a second time. Their bodies didn't have all the same parts humans did. While they didn't look especially noble, they were probably still purebloods. But based on Elisabeth's explanation, that meant they shouldn't be showing up on human land.

Why were the beastfolk there, then?

The questions just kept piling up. But Kaito didn't exactly have time to ask the beastfolk directly.

Their hands already on the hilts of their swords, the beastfolk began moving.

They approached Kaito and Hina, their movement offering no openings.

Raising his hand, Kaito struck a pose that would let him snap his fingers at a moment's notice. Hina pulled out her long halberd from their bottomless magical bag in a single fluid motion.

The beastfolk peered up at Kaito, as though appraising him.

He returned the examining looks with a composed, questioning gaze.

The next moment, the beastfolk nodded among themselves, then moved as one.

Bending the knee like loyal retainers, they all knelt in front of Kaito.

".....What?"

"Sir Kaito Sena, we presume."

The voice that spoke up was deep. Dumbfounded as he was, Kaito reflexively thanked his golem body's native translation functions. The odds were high that the beastfolk were speaking a different language from the one humans regularly used. If not for his built-in translation ability, Kaito probably wouldn't have been able to understand the beastfolk at all.

The beastman, who had coppery hair, a brilliant tassel atop his sword, and a wolf head, picked up where he left off.

"We wish to humbly request you travel back to our territory with us."

The beastman raised his face. His golden eyes glimmered with determination as he looked at Kaito.

The next words that came out of the wolf-headed beastman's mouth weren't what Kaito had been expecting in the slightest.

"We intend to receive the enemy of mankind as an honored guest."





“Explain to me what’s going on here.”

Kaito immediately made a firm request.

The moment he’d heard what the beastman had said, memories from his past life had rushed through his mind.

Back in his old world, there hadn’t been any sort of clear menace to humanity like the demons. Because of that, international politics there were a good deal more complicated.

And just the other day, this world, too, had been largely freed from the menace of the demons, with the exception of Kaito.

Kaito knew next to nothing about the historic relationship between humans and beastfolk. However, he had a pretty good sense of the friction that existed between the two groups. Beastfolk were banned from some areas within the human lands, and the border around the area where the pure-blooded beastfolk lived was generally closed off. That information was enough for him to more or less surmise the resentment that plagued interactions between the two races. As a matter of fact, the very hill they were standing on had been the site of a bloody conflict fought by humans and beastfolk long before the Duke had started using it.

At the same time, according to Izabella, the borderland between the pureblood region and the human realm had been the image of tranquility ever since the third peace treaty.

*Now that the situation has stabilized, they’re inviting the enemy of another race into their home base.*

Kaito wasn’t stupid enough for the implications of that decision to go over his head. He absolutely had to avoid destroying the delicate balance between the two parties. But the beastfolk weren’t out of surprises just yet.

“The reason we wish to invite you is thus. A sudden tragedy has occurred in our lands, and we would humbly ask of you to aid us in settling the matter. Some entity has been attacking our villages, and several terrible massacres have already occurred.”

“Massacres?”

Upon hearing that unsettling word, Kaito instinctively furrowed his brow. The wolf-headed beastman’s lustrous fur rustled as he nodded. It was possible that he’d seen the tragic scenes himself, as he spoke his next words in a pained voice.

“They didn’t spare women, children, the elderly...not even infants. We lost several patrolling warriors as well. I’d never laid eyes on a hellscape like that before. If this goes on, yet more villages will be slaughtered. We need strength.”

“Hold on a second. If you need help to stop the killings, then I’d be glad to lend a hand. But just now, you said that you intended to receive the ‘enemy of mankind’ as an honored guest, right?”

“Indeed, I did.”

The wolf-headed beastman nodded seriously. But Kaito had difficulty finding a connection between that oddly specific choice of phrasing and the

massacres in the villages. His tone grew tougher as he gave voice to his misgivings.

"Why do you need the 'enemy of mankind'? It feels weird to say it myself, but willingly asking for help from the Kaiser and his contractor is plain nuts. If the situation is so dire that you can't deal with it yourselves, couldn't you just ask the humans for help?"

"We are requesting your assistance precisely because we do not have that option. We cannot afford to let the humans know what we're doing. Mankind has been assailed by demons as of late, and in order to be good neighbors, we've been freely, albeit surreptitiously, providing them aid in the form of resources and money. However, we cannot see this recent tragedy as anything but a complete betrayal of that goodwill."

"So in other words..."

"We suspect that the perpetrator is human—and not merely an individual, but a group."

The wolf-headed beastman nodded, and behind him, his subordinates did the same.

Kaito gulped. The fight against the demons had only just ended. Now there were claims that a tragedy had been carried out by human hands. Could that really be what was happening? Kaito found himself baffled.

The beastman before him spoke with a voice full of bloodlust.

"Allow me to speak frankly. Depending on the circumstances, we may wish to employ you, the enemy of mankind, as a guest commander. The Church's lauded canon, the Shepherd, La Mules, is no more. But they still possess many other living weapons they call saints. The only ones capable of facing them in a head-to-head battle are the demons."

"Do you have any proof humans are behind the killings?"

Kaito posed his question in a low voice. But he already had a sense of what their answer was.

The wolf-headed swordsman stared back at Kaito. Fury and conviction burned in his golden eyes.

That was answer enough.

Quietly exhaling, Kaito revised his question.

"All right, then. What's your reasoning?"

"No kin of ours would have left the corpses in such an appalling state."

Kaito frowned, unsatisfied by the beastman's answer. It didn't seem like anything more than an emotionally charged judgment. But the beastman pressed on, assuring him that it wasn't so.

"Our sense of morality differs from humanity's. We use the fur, the skin, and the bones of the deceased, and should circumstances permit, we also partake of their flesh. Such an act may be difficult for humans to appreciate, but that is the way we have held funeral rites all the way back to the age of the Forest King. But these corpses were defiled to an extreme degree."

He clenched his fists tightly as he spoke. Kaito could practically make out the sound of bones creaking.

"The victims had their innards pulled out while they were still alive. Then their entrails were left to rot alongside the bodies. Our people would never do such a thing, not even to a foe. But it wasn't the work of a demi-human, either. We share half our territory with them, but their ethics line up closely with ours."

*So process of elimination, huh?*

The culprit wasn't a beastman or a demi-human. That left only one possibility.

Kaito cast his gaze downward. From his human perspective, using the body parts of the dead and consuming them sounded plenty sacrilegious. But even in other worlds, different countries had different death rituals. Having completely different races no doubt only made that effect more pronounced.

On top of that, beastman fur and skin were considerably more robust and versatile than their human equivalents. They probably had a long history of prospering by using their own bodies as resources.

And while Kaito's spiritual sensibilities as a former inhabitant of modern-day Japan made it hard for him to fully comprehend, the expressions on the beastfolk's faces clearly showed just how much of a taboo they considered the mistreatment of those corpses to be.

The wolf-headed beastman repeated himself in a voice steeped in hatred.

"We have a hard time imagining anyone but a human could have done this."

"It could also be someone trying to get you to think that."

"Of course. That's precisely why we need your assistance. We must decide on a carefully considered judgment. If this was the act of one of our countrymen, then we must dole out a suitable punishment. And if a human did this, then we must repay their cruelty with blood."

The beastman spoke quickly and sternly.

Kaito reflexively covered his face with one of his hands. He, Kaito Sena, was the enemy of mankind. It looked like the beastfolk wanted to use his power to secure their territory as well as have him act as a third party who could make calm decisions regarding the tragedy.

The burden being placed on him was surprisingly heavy. He heaved an equally heavy sigh as he removed his hand from his face.

"Why me, though? I said it before, didn't I? As soon as you get a demon and a contractor involved, don't you think the situation's just gonna take a turn for the worse?"

"Sir Kaito, it's not as though we reached out to you based on no information at all. We've heard about the incident with the Earl."

"The Earl?"

Kaito tilted his head to the side at the unexpected mention of a name from his past.

The Earl was a demon who'd bought up children and used them to perform Grand Guignols. Kaito had gotten wrapped up in one of his hellish

games, but Neue had protected him, allowing him to narrowly escape with his life.

He wouldn't have thought that incident would come up, nor had he thought it would have anything to do with the beastfolk trusting him.

As question marks floated across Kaito's face, the beastman elaborated.

"Before we came up with our plan to contact you, we obtained some documents that were leaked during the Capital's destruction regarding the battles against the fourteen demons. Within them was a record that was appended after the Kaiser's escape detailing the battle against the Earl. The Torture Princess had given a new testimony about the servant she'd been concealing from the Church."

"About me?"

Surprised by that information, Kaito opened his eyes wide. As he did, he recalled what Clueless had said.

*"Elisabeth. You're the one who failed to report having summoned the soul of someone from another world, aren't you?"*

Elisabeth had concealed some—possibly all—information regarding Kaito from the Church. But after the fight against Clueless, they'd discovered Kaito's existence, and Elisabeth had probably been forced to give a fresh, detailed report on him.

Elisabeth had never told him what that report contained.

The wolf-headed beastman began talking about its particulars.

"It appeared to emphasize the fact that her servant was a Sinless Soul, one who, at the time, didn't deserve to be executed. The report also had information about how you tried to rescue children during the battle against the Earl. It seems you even cut off your own hand to that end."

"...Sure, but in the end, the Earl ate them all. I couldn't save a single one of them."

"Even so, you fought desperately, making no distinctions between the demi-humans and beastfolk among the human children. That's why we decided it would be worthwhile to take a gamble on you. And our conviction has only deepened upon following you and watching you fight. Forgive me the discourtesy of asking, but you were holding back while facing those human warriors just a moment ago, weren't you?"

"I mean, yeah."

Kaito nodded frankly. He hadn't adjusted to his power yet. Apparently, it was obvious to anyone who knew what to look for that he'd been going easy on his opponents earlier. The wolf-headed beastman gave a deep nod in reply.

"The difference between your strength and theirs was plain to see. It would have been all too easy for you to kill them. You could have even done all manner of cruel, unspeakable things to them. But you chose not to. And you don't give off the thick stench of gold and blood that evildoers do. We've come to the conclusion that you're exactly the person the report made you out to be."



"I see. Well, if you guys are fine with it, then I don't have any problems. I'll take you up on your offer. I can't make any promises about the whole temp commander part, but lead on."

Kaito gave his answer. Offering no interjections, Hina just wordlessly pressed herself against him.

The wolf-headed beastman's golden eyes glittered. He quickly lowered his head and professed his thanks.

"Are you quite sure? You have our gratitude and will enjoy our finest hospitality."

"I'm gonna say up front that I dunno how useful I'm gonna be. There is something I want to confirm for myself, though... Would you mind leading us to the village where the killings happened? I'm no expert, but there should be stuff I can figure out anyway. Oh, right..."

Kaito opened his mouth to speak. His next few words slipped across his lips a little too naturally.

A light smile crossed his face as he asked his question.

"...Are the bodies from the massacre still where you found them? I wanna have a look at the corpses."

His tone was cheerful—too cheerful for the words he'd just said.

A moment later, Kaito was aghast at how callous he'd been, and as expected, the beastfolk scrunched up their faces as well. A pervasive look of repugnance flashed across their eyes. It was then that Kaito realized a certain fact.

*Man, I really am a demon's contractor.*

He was, without a doubt, the vessel the Kaiser had acknowledged.



The teleportation circle the beastfolk were using was different from those used by humans. The principles behind both methods were identical, but the beastfolk's circle used shavings from dried organs and a powder made from desiccated blood and crushed bone.

"It is a magical tool made from the remains of a late mage of ours."

The explanation was given by the wolf-headed beastman, whose name was apparently Lute.

Apparently, even people who knew nothing about magic could use it to go where they pleased. The downside was that you needed to draw the circle a second time when you wanted to go back to where you came from. And while the tool was convenient, it would no doubt be branded as contraband anywhere in human society. Even possessing such a thing would likely carry a stiff punishment.

"The legend of the Saint who carried God within her body is well celebrated in our lands as well. But instead of God, we place more stock in the land and in nature, for they are what foster life. We have escaped Diablo's affections, and we are far removed from the blessings of God as

well. While we have the ability to sniff out and analyze magic's dregs, those among us who can properly wield magic are few and far between. Because of that, our mage requested that their remains be used as communal property."

"I see, so it's kinda unique."

"It gladdens me that you understand."

Lute had given his explanation with caution, as though he'd been afraid of incurring Kaito's revulsion. Kaito nodded. If they'd gotten permission from the mage in question, then he had no intention of disparaging their culture.

As the two of them talked, Lute's subordinates were hard at work drawing the teleportation circle atop the hill. Before long, the pattern was complete, its form far more geometrical than the kind human mages used.

"Please, this way. First, I can lead to you to the village where one of the massacres took place. We were searching for traces the killer left up until this morning, so...the bodies should still be undisturbed."

"All right, please do."

Lute gestured for Kaito to line up next to him, and so he did. Hina followed beside him. Kaito spontaneously reached behind her back and embraced her, and she leaned in tight to his side.

Then Lute drew a scarlet stone from his breast pocket and struck it like flint, pouring a shower of sparks over the places where the shaved organs were piled up high.

"*Hoh* (A rain of gold), *hoh* (a tempest of flame), *hou* (the awakening), *hoh* (has come), *hou* (now burst into flame)."

As he did, flames shot up around the teleportation circle's circumference, and a cloud of red and white sand began billowing forth from its center.

The fierce sandstorm blotted out Kaito's and Hina's sight. The two hues blended together in front of their eyes in complex patterns, like a sand painting. The sand then hardened into a wall, cracked, and collapsed.

The red-and-white mass toppled onto the ground in square chunks, then vanished.

When his vision returned, Kaito found himself standing in the land of the beastfolk.



*So this is what it's like, huh?*

Kaito recalled the information he'd heard from Hina back when Lute's subordinates had been setting up the teleportation circle.

The pureblood borough was where the beastfolk nobles lived. That was common knowledge, even among humans. But it was impossible to have a society with only an upper class. Soldiers were needed to protect the borders, farmers to till the land and tend to the livestock, merchants to

manage the flow of goods, and all sorts of other people. Beastman society had advanced far past the days of subsistence hunting. But as far as humans were concerned, they generally assumed everyone but the ruling class was treated as nothing more than possessions.

As a result, the perception of the pureblood borough as a “land of aristocrats” had persisted even to the present day.

The logic was that limiting the number of owners made for more convenient negotiations. But the simple village sitting before them proved that vague yet extravagant impression of outsiders was flawed.

The village was surrounded by a wooden fence with toxic vines wound around it, likely as a basic defensive measure. All over the village, Kaito could make out animal-shaped weather vanes and cloth charms hanging low to the ground that made it clear how much the inhabitants revered the wind and the earth. The buildings’ foundations were stone, but pretty much everything else was made of wood, with scales and leather plastered onto the roofs and doors. The beastfolk lands were farther north than where most humans lived, but it was unclear at a glance how much protection from the elements the buildings actually offered. Finally, the last noteworthy feature of the hamlet was the boorish chains strung up between a dozen or so of the houses.

Assailed by unease, Kaito strained his eyes.

The chains were wound together like a spiderweb, and there were a number of pieces of game hanging from them.

There were large figures, medium-sized figures, and figures so small that you could hold them in your arms.

And all of them were swarming with flies. The hanging figures’ silhouettes shifted slightly each time the insects squirmed.

It was at that moment that Kaito noticed the thick, familiar scent of blood and rotting flesh.

Before he confirmed the nature of the figures, he closed his eyes once. The Kaiser’s eerily human laughter resounded in his eardrums. Hina made to step in front of him, but Kaito stopped her with one arm as he prepared himself for the worst.

Then he opened his eyes again and looked straight ahead at the tragedy.

As he’d suspected, the ones strung up were the village’s inhabitants.

The fox-headed beastfolk were decorating the village like spoils from a hunt.

A carnival. The aftermath of a fox hunt.

Imprudent similes flashed through Kaito’s mind. But eventually, he arrived at the most appropriate descriptor of all.

A massacre.

There was no other word that could describe the horrible scene before him.

Blood and bile ran along the length of the chains and dripped slowly to the ground. All the victims had their stomachs carved out, their empty

abdominal cavities visible from the outside. White maggots were wriggling around in their flesh.

Clenching his fists, Kaito drew closer to the corpses. He looked up at their expressions. Their faces were all stiff and filled with a terrible sense of anguish. The intensity of that emotion was no different between humans and beastfolk.

"Yeah...I'm sure it must have been painful."

Kaito spoke quietly. Rage and hatred toward the unknown perpetrator flared up inside him. But his experiences in life had left him well accustomed to those negative emotions, and he quickly regained his composure.

Looking back between the buildings, he posed a question to Lute.

"...What about the insides?"

"The insides?"

"What happened to their innards?"

Kaito gave his inquiry in a dispassionate tone. After being taken aback for a moment, Lute hesitated to answer.

Kaito waited for a response. There should have been a fairly substantial amount of other viscera. However, those organs were nowhere to be seen. He could make out little bits spilled here and there, but most of it was clearly missing.

A few seconds later, Lute gave his pained reply.

"It repulses me just to say it, but they were all shoved into a barn. There is no shortage of people who ridicule beastfolk for engaging in animal husbandry. We came to the conclusion that the way the killer dealt with the organs, too, was intended to provoke us."

"Have they also been left the way you found them?"

"Given the state they're in, we deemed it difficult to handle them individually. We plan to burn the entire barn to the ground later."

"Let me have a look."

Kaito made his request directly. Stooping over, Lute gave him a worried warning.

"...It's really quite a dreadful sight, you know."

"That's fine. I've seen people who had their guts and brains fused together while they were still alive."

With a sympathetic nod, Lute took the lead and began walking off. However, his underlings stood frozen in place. It looked as though they didn't want to have to see the grisly scene in the barn a second time.

Kaito and Hina left the subordinates behind and followed after Lute. He stopped in front of a shed adjoining a small farm. After hesitating for a moment, he pulled off the bar sealing its door shut.

*He doesn't want to have to open the door himself.*

Once he realized that, Kaito spontaneously took the initiative. Trading places with Lute, he placed his hand on the door.

Then he slowly pushed it open.



Flies buzzed around noisily. The stench of blood and rotting flesh ran thick.

Kaito nodded as he strained his eyes against the oddly subdued, dim red light.

*Yeah, seeing this would definitely be traumatic if you weren't used to this kinda stuff.*

With Hina beside him, his stare was fixed on the grisly spectacle.

A mountain of beastman innards sat amid the muck, blood, and tallow clinging to the floor. Ravaged intestines and pulverized stomachs blended together, their contents spilling out. The stench they gave off was even worse than that of the corpses. The various lumps of flesh were so repulsive that it was almost unimaginable to think they'd once been inside people. Upon closer inspection, though, there were things other than innards mixed into the pile.

Kaito spotted pig heads and cow heads, garnishing the pile like comical decorations atop a macabre cake.

Kaito grabbed one of the pig heads by the ear and pulled. It made a grotesque sound as it came out. Mucus leaked from an orifice. After carefully examining the opening at the base of the severed head, Kaito looked back toward the mountain of innards.

A few seconds later, a quiet mumble escaped his lips.

"...There's no meaning to this."

Suddenly, Kaito released his grip. The pig head fell. After bouncing once off the floor, it sank back into the sea of guts like a deflated rubber ball.

Behind him, Lute spoke up dubiously.

"What do you mean by that?"

"What I mean is that this isn't any kind of provocation, message, or sacrilege."

Kaito's declaration was firm.

He pointed at the animal heads artlessly mixed in with the innards.

"If they wanted to give it some kind of meaning, there had to have been a better way they could have used the animal corpses. It's too random, too crude to have been by choice. It relies too heavily on the viewer's imagination."

"But then...why use the barn?"

"Oh, that part is real simple."

Kaito's voice was lilting as he gave his answer. A spectacle on the scale of the one before him didn't even faze him anymore.

Because of that, he simply described the situation as he saw it.

"There were stains on the ground from the extracted innards. In other words, the perpetrator started out simply leaving the guts on the ground after they yanked them out. But over time, they started to build up and *get in the way*. That's the reason why the killer gathered them all up and shoved them in one place. Then the animals were noisy, so they shut them

up. I know it's a messed-up way to put it, but it was probably all just part of their *assembly line*."

As he listened to Kaito talk, Lute's fur stood on end. Kaito wondered a little if that was a normal reaction, or if Lute's rage was simply that tempestuous.

Lute's golden eyes were filled with loathing as he glared alternately between Kaito and the grim scene.

"You...you mean to tell me that *that's* the reason they created this monstrosity?"

"Yeah, probably. And you don't have to glare at me like that, you know. It's not like I'm the one who did it."

"...Ah, forgive me. How rude of me."

Lute hurriedly looked away from Kaito. But the repulsion and disgust he'd directed toward Kaito for coming up with such a fiendish conjecture still remained in his eyes. Kaito, not pointing that out, just nodded and closed the barn door. He then made his way back to the chains between the buildings.

When he did, he resumed his examination of the strung-up corpses.

The victims' shoulders had stiffened in an odd way. That was due to the fact that the chains had been run into their left shoulders, then behind their necks, and finally back out through their right shoulders. They'd each lost huge amounts of blood. And all that had probably happened while they were still alive.

"So whoever it was, they hung the victims up while they were still alive, then tore open their chests and ripped out their insides, huh?"

"And there isn't any major damage to the chains, is there? They must have run it through with a single blow each time without any need to try again."

"There's no way a regular human could use a chain that way... This must have been done by someone else."

Kaito and Hina were whispering to each other. Behind them, Lute straightened out his posture. At some point, his subordinates had assembled as well.

The beastfolk were silent, their expressions tense as they awaited Kaito's conclusion.

*I know how they feel.*

As he felt their intense gazes wash over him, he realized why they'd thought this atrocity had been committed by human hands. They didn't want to believe that one of their own could perform an act of such heinous violence, even if it meant ignoring reality. And it was only natural to want to know the purpose behind such an incomprehensibly brutal act.

The witnesses needed there to be *some* kind of motive in order to come to terms with this tragedy.

That was precisely the reason why the beastfolk had decided their enemy must be mankind.

*And there are even parts to that logic that are sound.*

Humans wasn't to blame for this. But it also wasn't the work of a beastman.

The crime couldn't have been committed by just anyone. And there hadn't been any objective beyond causing pain.

It had been *perverse*.

It was just an insane, evil crime.

"I know who did this."

Then Kaito made his assertion. Hina quietly nodded. The beastfolk were struck speechless.

"...Who in the world was it, then?"

The chains rattled in the wind. The bodies swung back and forth. The flies took off, and the thick, rotting fragrance wafted by.

Assailed by every unpleasant sensation imaginable, Kaito spoke.

"It was a demon. I'm sure of it."

But there was a fierce contradiction between that answer and reality.

All fourteen of the demons' contractors were supposed to be dead.

After all, it had been none other than Kaito himself, alongside the Torture Princess, who had killed every last one.



# 2 A Mysterious Foe

F r e a m d T o r l o r c h e a n







## 2

### A Mysterious Foe

Time flowed on mercilessly, leaving mortal matters and concerns behind in its wake.

The sky grew dark. The hill where Kaito had knocked out the paladins was blanketed in darkness as well.

Even the holes in the earth gouged by conflicts past were cast in black relief. It was as though a jet-black sea had spread over the entire area, concealing the coffins and bones in deep shadows and bringing a gentle silence to the surroundings.

Then a sharp noise rang out.

—*Click, clack.*

A beautiful woman stood atop the hill's summit, her heels ringing like the notes of a song.

It was Elisabeth Le Fanu, the Torture Princess. She cast her crimson gaze on the area around her, taking it in with a scornful eye.

"So this is where you went, eh? You chose yet another unpleasant and nostalgic spot."

Elisabeth scoffed.

Her silken black hair fluttered, as did the dress she was wearing, which was colored scarlet on the inside and extended past her waist. As she stood atop the hill, she began searching for irregularities. A few seconds later, she dropped to one knee and knelt on the ground. Not shying away from the bones around her in the slightest, she inspected the spot where she'd noticed the influx of mana.

At first glance, there didn't appear to be anything left. Someone had probably been in charge of destroying the evidence and, as such, had carefully scooped up the earth and smoothed it out. But concentrating to her utmost, Elisabeth discovered a spot that was stained ever so slightly red.

"Hmm."

She scooped it up with the tip of her finger and stuck it in her mouth. As the mana lingered on her tongue, she searched her memories. Upon zeroing in on a particular magical tool, she spat out the dirt and lightly brushed off her soiled tongue.

"Mana mixed with the taste of old flesh. Blood, bone, and organ shavings. Primitive, but convenient. I'd thought it banned across all human lands, so... Ah."

Elisabeth heaved a deep sigh.

After receiving notice from the Church about a new sighting of the Kaiser's contractor, she'd made the unusual choice of visiting the scene herself. The reason she'd done so was because there'd been a point that had caught her attention in the report she'd received.

It had been in the testimony of one of the paladins who'd apparently been saved after barely escaping with his life.

When he'd been on the threshold between dreams and consciousness, he reported feeling like he'd heard the Kaiser's contractor having a conversation with someone.

There was a chance that the person Kaito had been talking to had been no more than Hina, Vlad, or the Kaiser. But the timing was too ominous to casually overlook it.

*'Tis been quite some time since Kaito made his declaration of war at the Capital.*

Unlike the demons to date, Kaito was capable of holding a dialogue. Now was around the time when people would start to realize that. Someone might have finally tried to make contact with him.

That was what sparked Elisabeth's apprehension. And it seemed her fears had been wholly on the mark.

And what's more, the first to come into contact with him had been of a different race.

"The other person is a beastman, eh? This is turning out to be quite bothersome indeed."

If that was the case, then she had a new problem to deal with.

The beastfolk's pureblood borough was completely off-limits. The Church's eyes didn't reach that far, and Elisabeth now found herself wholly unable to pursue Kaito. The Torture Princess was a pawn of the Church, and a powerful weapon to boot. If she went and trespassed on the beastman territories on her own, it could very well end up sparking a war.

"What in the blazes have you gotten yourself wrapped up in, Kaito? What are your intentions?"

Elisabeth whispered, and the darkness around her grew steadily deeper. No answer came back. That was only natural.

Once, Kaito had tried to remain by Elisabeth's side to the bitter end. But now he was off in a distant land.

Kaito Sena had chosen to become the enemy of mankind.

And now the beastfolk had reached out to him.

It was unclear what the significance of that was, or what consequences it would bring about.

The only thing for certain was that Kaito had temporarily slipped Elisabeth's reach.

"... 'Tis nonsense."

She bit down on her lip, enraged. But the thing that upset her wasn't Kaito's disappearance itself. No, the object of her anger was a different emotion that was welling up within her whether she wanted it to or not.

She had just felt a definite sense of relief  
at the fact that she was unable to kill Kaito Sena.  
And as the Torture Princess, that was something she could not allow.



“Ah, *achoo!*”

“Oh my, did you catch a cold? Our lands are far chillier than those in which humans live. As you can see, we are blessed with thick fur. But adjusting the temperature to suit human tastes is an area we find ourselves tragically deficient in. If the fire doesn’t meet your needs, please don’t hesitate to say something.”

“No, no, I’m fine. It’s not a cold. It really does feel like someone’s talking about me behind my back, though.”

Lute’s words were brusque yet filled with earnest concern, and Kaito’s reply was easygoing.







The sun had long since set, and they'd left the village where the massacre had taken place behind.

They were currently in a different small village, one that sported a row of simple houses just like the last. Its tall fence was crafted from interwoven branches, and Kaito and the others were huddled around an open-air fire near its entrance. Trees spread out in every direction. Humidity percolated in the shadows the trees cast, causing the chill to sink into their skins. However, the strong flames did a lot to help drive the cold away.

A pot full of water sat atop the fire, and finely torn flower petals sat simmering inside it. Before long, the water was dyed a vivid orange hue.

Hina had been watching over the pot, and her maid uniform rustled as she quickly stood.

"All right, if I decoct these any longer, it'll go bitter. Quickly and carefully...now!"

Removing the pot from the flame, Hina scooped out the withered, mushy petals. She placed them on a separate plate, then sliced up some dried fruit and added it to the pot. As the lingering heat warmed them up, the orange water started to take on a reddish tinge. After deciding the hard chunks had spread out enough, she began ladling the pot's contents into bowls.

"There you go, Master Kaito and Mr. Lute. Eat up."

"Thanks, Hina."

"Oh my, you've done a wonderful job with the leaves we brought along. Your functions are a marvel, Madam Hi...na... No, forgive my rudeness. I'd been told you were an automaton, Madam Hina, but I should have referred to you the same way I would a person. In my carelessness, I spoke presumptuously. My apologies. Erm..."

"Hee-hee, please, don't worry about it. I am my beloved Master Kaito's eternal lover, his faithful companion, his soldier, his weapon, his love outlet, his sex doll, and his bride—all because I am a puppet. And I take great pride in that fact."

Hina flashed a gentle smile. His eyes filling with admiration, Lute held his bowl high.

"Well said. Whatever one's nature is, being able to take pride in it is a beautiful thing. In that case, I wish to express my thanks toward your functions once more."

Though he was singing Hina's praises, Lute didn't bring the bowl to his mouth. It seemed beasts and beastfolk alike favored their senses of smell, as the shape of his mouth relaxed while he savored the aroma. Apparently, it was beastfolk custom to wait for food to cool completely before eating.

Kaito was the first to have a taste. The broth had a curious viscosity to it.

A honey-like sweetness that was mixed with the fruit's acidity filled his mouth. The flavor seemed to wash all the fatigue from his body. Slowly exhaling, Kaito looked up at the night sky.

As he gazed at the smattering of stars in the darkness, he let out a small remark.

"...I'm not seeing anyone."

"Quite. And I was so ready to rend them limb from limb."

"I've yet to sense anyone suspicious around us, either."

As they calmly passed the time, the three of them quietly whispered among themselves. They were feigning being relaxed, but they were constantly surveying their surroundings. Lute's subordinates were doing the same.

All of them were waiting.

They were waiting to ambush the killer when they attacked a new village.



Their simple yet precise plan had been suggested by a rather unexpected source.

"Let's put aside the matter of who the killer is for the moment. Right now, we should be focusing on how to prevent the next massacre."

Back at the village with the strung-up victims, Kaito had shelved the prospect of identifying the one responsible.

Just because they'd figured out that the culprit was a demon didn't mean they had any concrete way of stopping the killings. Their top priority needed to be preventing the murderer from preying on any more victims. And in order to do that, they had to figure out where the next attack would take place. But even though Kaito had been called in to help, his investigative capabilities were borderline nonexistent. Unfortunately, his presence wasn't doing much to improve the situation.

They also didn't have time to add him to the patrols that were going from village to village. More victims would undoubtedly spring up in the interim.

"Is there any way we could figure it out for...oh. Well, I guess we could ask *him*."

It was at that point that Kaito thought of asking a particular man for advice.

Specifically, the Kaiser's previous contractor: Vlad Le Fanu.

After all, the man had committed his fair share of massacres himself. His unique viewpoint might prove useful.

With that hope, Kaito ran mana through the jewel containing the replica of Vlad's soul.

Extravagant azure petals and black feathers sprang out from within. With that as his backdrop, Vlad made his appearance, as gracefully as always. His cravat paired well with his aristocratic outfit, and it waved from side to side as he crossed his legs in the empty air.

*"Do you have some business with me, my dear successor?"*

"There's something I want your opinion on. Do you mind?"

*"Hmm... Rather cheerful words, coming from a man who abandons others to mind-numbingly boring jewels once they've served their purpose."*

"Sorry about that, then. Back in you go."

*"Let me hear you out."*

It looked like Vlad's complaints about boredom were rather serious.

The beastfolk were startled by the man's—who was clearly no saint—sudden appearance, even though he was just a phantom. However, Kaito decided to leave off the explanation for later and instead told Vlad what had been going on.

Stroking his chin, Vlad nodded thoughtfully.

*"Lend me a map."*

Something had clearly piqued his interest, as he stared intently at the map Kaito held up. He fired off a series of questions to Lute as he pointed to various locations.

*"Where did the past killings take place? Hmm, beastman diets vary from species to species, so villages tend to be homogenous, correct? What types of animal were the victims? What, don't call them 'animals'? Oh, quit fussing over minor details. Hmm, I see. Now, how were they killed? Skinned, skewered, strung up... Now then, would you tell me about the species that live in the villages in this radius? Yes, all of them."*

Finally satisfied, Vlad stroked his chin again.

Having been made to recount the details of the past killings, fatigue crept across Lute's and his subordinates' faces. Kaito silently swore that if Vlad couldn't come up with anything after all that, then he'd never let him outside again. But Vlad himself snapped his fingers, his gesture overflowing with composure.

He indicated a particular village with a white-gloved hand.

*"The next attack will be here."*

"How can you know that?"

Kaito was taken aback at Vlad's confidence.

Vlad pointed at the map again, tracing a large circle with the site of the most recent attack at its center.

*"Oh, it's simple. At first glance, the locations of the killings don't seem to have any rhyme or reason. But they're all selected from within this circle surrounding the most recent attack, are they not? I think it rather likely that our foe's teleportation capabilities are restricted to this circle's diameter."*

"I mean, even so, that's a big area."

"Quite. And we had already calculated the range our enemy was teleporting at. But the area is too large to narrow it down to a single village they might target."

*"If that's the case, then you'd best change your point of view. Take a gander at the villagers who've been killed up till now. In order, it's rabbitfolk, birdfolk, and foxfolk. Skinning, skewering, and stringing up."*

*They've each been killed in an appropriate way, but they're rather diverse, aren't they?"*

*"You're not wrong, but so what?"*

*"The village I marked is both within the circle and home to deerfolk. In other words, a species with a trait not found in any of the victims to date—their antlers."*

*"But what does that have to do—"*

*"Hmm? Isn't it obvious, my dear successor? Think about what will happen after they're killed. The new spectacle, with the corpses all lined up. Think of all the possibilities that antlers offer when you're tormenting them and using them as decoration!"*

A heavy silence descended on them. The very air seemed to have suddenly grown colder.

Kaito was at a loss for words, and Hina shook her head. Lute and his men were practically brimming with bloodlust. As he basked in their judgmental gazes, Vlad smiled sweetly.

Then he brazenly went on, as though it were only natural that he give an answer when posed a question.

*"If it were me, I would undoubtedly choose this place! Assembly-line work is best when you're having fun!"*

*Man, "unthinkable" doesn't even begin to describe the way he thought about it... I mean, I called it an assembly line, too, but still.*

As he sipped at his flower soup, Kaito ruminated on the earlier events.

There were times when people really should refrain from saying everything that came to mind.

Although they'd gotten into a small quarrel, the group eventually decided to go off Vlad's hypothesis and lie in wait at the deerfolk village.

While the deer-headed beastfolk were taken aback by the arrival of both the national guard and visitors of another race, they let them in regardless. Despite their confusion, they'd even tried to show their guests a warm welcome. But Kaito and the others had turned them down, instead directing them not to come outside that night no matter what unless they were given the signal to flee.

Then, after holding a meeting on their routes and plans, they took up their positions by the village's front entrance.

At first, Kaito had been worried about that fact and had asked if it was okay for them to be out in the open. But according to Vlad, his concerns were unfounded.

*"Our foe will clearly be lax. After all, if they were to run into a patrol, they could simply annihilate the small fries to the last man! This time, though, those who were fated to become prey have brought along the Kaiser's contractor. And our foe is unaware of that fact. Because of that, our presence should have little effect on how our foe moves. Go forth and meet them boldly! That is the proper way a tyrant ought to conduct himself!"*

Vlad had, in fact, been useful. But his thoughtless remarks toward the beastfolk had crossed the line.

At present, he had been crammed into his jewel once more. It had been squirming in displeasure for some time now. But Kaito blithely ignored Vlad's complaints.

*All's well and good if his intuition's on the mark, but...if it isn't, more people are gonna die.*

Anxious, Kaito cast a glance toward Lute. His golden eyes were filled with a tension so fierce that it seemed like he might stop breathing. Lute had agreed to Kaito and Vlad's proposal. But it hadn't been anything more than a compromise on his part, as he hadn't been able to come up with anything more effective. Kaito could tell.

Lute had been the one to invite him. But that definitely didn't mean he trusted Kaito and his companions. He'd promised them hospitality, but the situation was nowhere near peaceful enough to just take an outsider at his word.

*Given that they invited me as a visiting commander, a member of the nobility has to be behind it. I don't know how monolithic the beastfolk are, but if nothing else, it's gotta be someone who's at least involved in their national politics.*

Still, he didn't know who that person was. For that matter, they hadn't even taken him to their headquarters or told him anything beyond the details of the killings. And in spite of all that, they were having him do dangerous fieldwork for them.

If Kaito's promise to help turned out to not be of any use, Lute and his men probably weren't planning on giving him any additional information.

In a sense, it could be said they were taking advantage of his goodwill. But even though he realized that, it didn't make him feel particularly put out.

*After all, I'm just a fugitive right now. I'd much rather be of use to someone than aimlessly running around and trying to find someplace to hide.*

Kaito had no desire to get exploited in some scheme and become embroiled in an international controversy. Compared with that, sleeping outside in order to help catch a serial killer was a piece of cake.

Besides, the unease that Lute and his men were feeling was genuine. They wanted to resolve the situation from the bottoms of their hearts.

And the fact that a huge number of beastfolk had been brutally killed was true as well.

Given all that, he had no reason not to lend them his aid.

*But the thing that's bugging me is...*

Why was a demon doing this? They were all supposed to be dead. Had a new contractor appeared?

*Or could it be that...*



On that note, Kaito shook his head and cut off that train of thought. Mindlessly listing off possibilities wouldn't do him any good. Any matter involving demons quickly surpassed rational expectations.

Right now, he needed to focus on the danger directly in front of him.

As he forcibly changed gears in his mind, he drank down the rest of the floral soup. His bowl was empty, and Hina's eyes sparkled when she saw that. She raised her hand with the vigor of a puppy wagging its tail.

"Master Kaito, Master Kaito! The seconds your faithful Hina made are over here, my love!"

"Could I have more, then, darling?"

"Of course! I shall serve it alongside a hearty helping of love!"

Hina smiled as she took the bowl from Kaito. As he watched their exchange, Lute displayed a dumbfounded expression. After a moment, though, he oohed admiringly.

"My, how passionate. Could it be that you two aren't master and servant, but lovers?"

"We're married, actually."

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek! My heart's fluttering so hard that I might just die!"

Upon hearing Kaito's immediate reply, Hina's face flushed. Placing her hands on her cheeks, she began twisting back and forth. Lute became more and more bewildered.

"O-oh. That reminds me, Madam Hina, you did just refer to yourself as his bride. I see. So Madam Hina, the automaton, is your wife, then, Sir Kaito?"

"Why? Is that weird?"

Kaito posed the question. Lute had reacted with revulsion and disgust to some of the things he and Vlad had said and done. And the beastfolk revered nature, so there was no guarantee that they wouldn't feel hostility toward automatons. Kaito gave up, not expecting anything in the way of a favorable response. But to his surprise, Lute violently shook his head from side to side.

"No, not in the slightest!"

Kaito was a bit astonished at how insistent Lute seemed.

He definitely didn't seem to be lying. Oddly bashful, Lute cleared his throat.

"Ahem, the thing is, you see... My wife is both a decade my junior and a goatwoman. She's a wonderful girl with a pure heart who loves the wind and the earth...but as you can see, I'm a wolfman. We encountered no small amount of antagonism leading up to our marriage. I am very fortunate that my master is an open-minded one, and that my subordinates get along with my wife so well. To this day, though, there are those who speak poorly of us behind our backs."

"My goodness, how dreadful! It grinds my gears when people get in the way of mutual love!"

"Thank you for your kind words. You truly are a compassionate woman. In that respect, I see little difference between the two of you, and you clearly hold a great deal of affection for each other. I think the two of you are wonderful for each other!"

With that, Lute patted his chest. Kaito involuntarily softened his expression.

Hina's cheeks were growing more and more flushed, and she was twirling her fingers aimlessly in the air.

"'Wonderful for each other'? Oh my... While it's true that Master Kaito and I are a uniquely fated pair, and that we were bound by destiny the moment the world came into being, hearing you say so makes me feel rather bashful. Eek!"

"Yeah, hearing you say that makes me real happy. I bet your wife's happy, too, having a husband who thinks so fondly of her."

Kaito's pleased expression and Hina's bashfulness seemed to be contagious. Lute laughed in embarrassment as he scratched his head.

His subordinates were looking their way in amusement. Upon noticing that fact, Lute got flustered and called out to them.

"Now, look here, you lot! What do you think you're doing, listening to us so intently?!"

"Lucky you, Captain, getting to brag about your wife to someone new!"

"All of us have heard every last one of your stories a million times already, after all!"

"Be quiet! Ahem... My goodness, though, what a surprise, being able to bond with another devoted husband like this."

"Yeah, same goes for me."

Kaito nodded. Lute's smile reached his golden eyes as he whispered gently.

"You see, we beastfolk don't much care for lies. So to speak quite candidly, I had thought you a rather cold-hearted man. But deep down, it seems that you're a compassionate gentleman after all."

Kaito found himself blinking at how unexpected the remark had been.

Lute's red tail swayed gently as he slowly went on.

"When we came to invite you, I purposefully gave you few reasons to lend us your assistance. I didn't even mention offering remunerations for your military advice. But despite all that, you came with us anyway. To tell you the truth, we'd been prepared for a much more protracted negotiation."

"Really? Wait, did I totally just miss a chance to get information out of you guys?"

"We held several trump cards to use if you tried. But if we'd had to, we probably wouldn't be sharing this fire as we are now. When inviting along a demon's contractor, great care must be taken in evaluating their character. Or so I'd thought, in any case, but it appears the impression of you that we got from the battle against the Earl held true."

Lute flashed him a faint smile, to which Kaito responded with a strong nod.

As he'd thought, Lute and his men didn't plan to offer up any information regarding the beastfolk. Even so, though, it looked like his amenable behavior had curried him some favor. They seemed to hold more trust in him than he'd expected.

That fact alone made Kaito truly glad.

Lute raised his bowl to try to conceal his bashfulness. He completely drained the cooled floral broth, then spoke.

"By the way, Mrs. Sena, might I trouble you for seconds?"

"Eeeeeee! He called me 'Mrs. Sena'! He called me 'Mrs. Sena'! For that, you can have as many refills as you want!"

"Wait, Hina, hold up. We're lying in ambush here, we can't drink too much, or—huh?"

Then Kaito trailed off midsentence.

Something was shining near the edge of his vision. Upon closer inspection, the moonlight was reflecting off something in the tree line. But there was nothing natural that should have glinted like that late at night in the forest.

Everything was completely silent, the lively atmosphere from a moment ago having vanished like a distant memory.

First Hina, then Lute stood up. Kaito rose to his feet as well.

Then he looked at the "thing."

"...What is that?"

It looked like neither a human nor a beast.

In fact, it didn't look alive at all.



At first glance, it looked like a silver spider.

Or, perhaps, a better way to put it would be to describe it as an intricate mass of rubbish.

Kaito squinted. Whatever it was that had appeared out of the darkness, it was made out of a series of joined pieces of metal. But although it did have eight legs, its basic shape was like that of an insect or a crustacean. However, the metal plates that made up its body constantly shifted and squirmed as they glimmered. The fact that its exterior was constantly undergoing minute changes caused its appearance to be wholly divergent from that of any creature found in nature.

Kaito involuntarily racked his memories for something similar to compare it to.

Suddenly, an old memory flashed through his mind. His teacher back in elementary school had been fond of visiting art museums, and Kaito thought back to the contents of a picture his teacher had enthusiastically described during recess one day.

*...Avant-garde art.*

The picture had been a piece of art enclosed in inorganic material that was designed to ridicule the living.

That was the closest thing he could come up with to describe the entity before him. But there was no reason for it to exist in this world, let alone within the beastfolk territories. It was probably akin to an underling that someone had created.

As he vigilantly collected his thoughts, Kaito felt a sense of unease.

*All the underlings up till now have been weirdly large animals and hideously distorted people.*

Underlings were, fundamentally, living creatures who'd undergone terrible transformations. Because of that, no matter how hideous they became, they usually resembled their original forms, more or less. But the thing he was facing now was far too alien to be a mere mutation.

It was simply too inorganic. And it was giving off too much power to be classified as a familiar.

*But then what the hell is it?*

Kaito found himself at a loss.

Then the thing—which probably resembled a machine more than a work of avant-garde art—began moving.

It immediately became oddly blurry as the chunks of metal making up its body started audibly vibrating. Then, as though it had received some kind of order, it spread its eight legs wide.

It looked almost like a massive silver lily sitting atop a grassy field.

Then it vanished.

"...Huh?"

Kaito lost sight of their foe. At the same time, *his arm moved*. His beastly left arm practically moved on its own to pursue the path the silver thing had taken. His sharp claws dug into and caught the flying machine.

Sparks flew, as though two swords had just collided.

After taking stock of the situation, he came to the realization that his arm was numb.

It was so very heavy.

Kaito let out a shout from the depths of his diaphragm.

"Hrrragh!"

Using all his strength, he swung down the arm he'd caught the thing's leg with.

The machine nearly crashed into the ground. Just before it made impact, though, it gave off a clacking noise and rearranged its body. Its previously straightened legs sprang joints. They gently bent, reducing the impact and allowing the machine to make a clean landing.

*—Screeeee, scraaaaaw!*

It let out a high-pitched, roar-like noise.

Hina frantically rushed over to Kaito's side. He turned to her, then asked a question.

"Hina, you know what that thing is?"

"I'm very sorry. My Self-Recording Device contains no information on anything resembling that. It isn't an automaton, and it isn't the same type of construct as the Church's communication devices. Whatever could it be?"

*"Oh-ho! Now there's a surprise!"*

A deep voice rang out from somewhere rather unexpected. Kaito's eyes went wide. It was rare for anything to elicit a response from the Kaiser. With his body still hidden, the supreme hound laughed in amusement.

*"Why, if it isn't Deus Ex Machina! I surely didn't expect to see that in a land such as this!"*

"—Wait, what did you just say?"

Kaito frowned at the strange echo. However, he didn't have time to sit around asking questions.

The shrill noise rang out once more.

*—Screeeeee, scraaaaaw!*

The machine rose to its feet. Its torso didn't so much as twitch as its eight legs began rapidly revolving. Spraying mud every which way, it drilled its way into the dirt.

Then, in the blink of an eye, the machine disappeared from the surface.

"...It burrowed."

"Master Kaito, I implore you to stay within a range I can defend you from."

Their entire party surveyed their surroundings. For a moment, the area was silent. The leaves on the trees rustled ever so slightly.

Then the ground exploded. The machine came flying out, its eight legs gathered to form a spear.

So fast that it seemed to have been shot from a catapult as it hurtled toward Lute.

"Captain!"

"I'm fine!"

Without needing to be told, he'd already anticipated that he might be attacked. As he calmly replied to his subordinate, Lute dropped down low to the ground. As he prepared for the impact, he readied his sword and let out a cry.

"You shall pay for the atrocities you've committed on our people! Starting with those legs of yours!"

As he raised his stormy battle cry, Lute brought down his sword. He'd probably assumed already that his weapon wouldn't pierce it, so instead of trying to cut the machine, he used the whole of his blade to strike it.

A hard noise rang out. His attack had landed cleanly on the machine. But as Kaito watched, he was taken aback. Even though the machine had been caught by Lute's intense blow, it was just casually floating in the air.

Its legs had grown even more joints, and those appendages coiled around Lute's sword.

"Rgh!"



“Lute!”

Kaito tried to snap his fingers.

Before he could, though, a graceful, explosive blow landed squarely on the machine’s torso.

“Hiyah!”

The hem of Hina’s maid uniform fluttered in the wind as she lashed out with her ax kick.

The sound of metal scraping echoed out from where the sole of her foot had connected with the machine.

After resisting for a second, the machine was blown away, sword and all. It crashed loudly into a tree. The tree’s trunk bent, creaked, then snapped, crashing to the ground with a thunderous noise amid a pillar of fumes.

Her silver hair swaying, Hina quietly lowered her foot, and her billowed-out skirt came to a gentle rest.

“Please, pull yourself together! You don’t want your wife mourning for you!”

“Ah, how shameful! I vow to return the favor!”

As he replied to Hina’s reprimand, Lute tried to adjust his grip on his sword. However, it had been sent flying along with the machine. His ears flopped limply. But he shook his head vigorously, and they stood right back up. Having regained his dignity, he directed a sharp cry to his troops.

“A spare sword!”

“Here!”

One of them pulled a new sword from their luggage and tossed it to him. Upon catching it, Lute nodded and drew his new weapon from its scabbard in a sweeping motion.

As he did, the machine rose back to its feet. Seemingly stunned, it began joining its silver metal plates together.

—*Screeeee, scraaaaaw!*

*Destroying it with brute force is gonna take a while. If we even can, that is.*

Having arrived at that conclusion, Kaito wiped away the sweat clinging to his brow. If they were able to fix it in place, they’d probably be able to pull out a victory. But if worse came to worst and it successfully burrowed its way to the village, another tragedy was bound to unfold.

The question, then, was how to finish the battle quickly and decisively.

Kaito racked his brains for the method that seemed most effective. Then he suddenly recalled a certain entity’s existence.

*Wait, that’s right. I have seen something similar to that thing, and it’s not just the avant-garde art.*

During the short period he’d attended school for, he’d seen one of the bosses in a video game that his classmate had been playing. It had been composed of a series of planks, and his classmate had used a variety of weapons to tear it apart.

The boss had been powerful. But individually, the planks weren't anything special.

Abruptly, Kaito spoke.

"Kaiser."

"..."

"Kaiser!"

*"What are you causing that racket for? A master as unworthy as you should take care not to call me so frivolously."*

"I'm gonna stop that thing. Lend me your power."

With that, Kaito made his plea. The Kaiser scoffed in irritation. Then he let out his humanlike laugh.

*"Ha, as if. That thing has nothing to do with demons. And destroying it would do little to exemplify my strength. Why, then, should I go out of my way to lend you my fangs?"*

"...It doesn't have anything to do with demons?"

The Kaiser's words weren't just surprising; they came as a legitimate shock.

Put another way, they meant the thing before them was neither an underling nor a familiar. But it wasn't a human, beast, or spirit, either.

What, in that case, could it possibly be?

*... "Deus Ex Machina"?*

That was what the Kaiser had called it.

Kaito couldn't afford to simply stay in the dark regarding the machine. He needed to find out what it was. But although his instincts were screaming that fact out to him, he temporarily swallowed his questions.

*Right now, I gotta focus on taking out the enemy in front of me.*

With that objective in mind, he gave voice to a different query.

"Answer me this. That thing is pretty strong, but the chunks of metal it's made of aren't all that tough...right?"

*"Something to that effect, I suppose. I can make out power residing in each of its pieces, but only by coming together as a colony can they demonstrate their strength. But whether you cut it or strike it, destroying its metal with your own is likely no mean task. And I've little desire to eat anything so hard. Now then, what do you intend to do?"*

"To be honest, I'm still not all that great at magic. But I've got a method that'll definitely hit it and should be effective, to boot."

Kaito made his assertion. The Kaiser was silent for a few seconds. Eventually, though, he seemed to understand.

Having guessed at the method Kaito was thinking of, the Kaiser finally took on an interested tone.

*"I see. As always, the manner in which you think leaves me unsure as to whether you're a madman or a fool. So what would you have me do?"*

"I've just got one request. I need you to bring me over there as accurately as you can."

*"Hmm \_\_\_\_\_ very well, I suppose."*

Considering the lengthy time that he'd taken in consideration, his tone was rather indifferent even though he had agreed to help.

All the while, the machine had been determining the new arrangement for its metal plates. Minute changes were taking place atop its arachnoid back. In the blink of an eye, it had gained a set of airplane-like wings.

It looked like Kaito's hunch had been right on the mark.

The longer the fight went on, the greater its range of attack would grow.

Oscillating its metal plates one by one, the thing flew high into the air. Hina readied herself to hurl her halberd after it. But Kaito stopped her with one hand. With a confused expression, she stood down.

"Master, if I may, why—"

As she was in the middle of asking her question, the Kaiser materialized next to Kaito. The hound could alter his form on a whim, but at the moment, he'd chosen to stand as tall as two adult men.

As he stooped down, the Kaiser uttered a languid murmur.

*"I suppose I don't mind tossing you from my mouth."*

The next moment, he bit down on Kaito's collar and hurled him into the air.

The machine was silently making its descent from on high when Kaito flew precisely in front of it.

His military uniform fluttered as he blocked the machine's path. It seemed like it hadn't anticipated his actions, either, so it didn't intercept his flight. However, it reached out one of its feeler-like sections and spontaneously ran Kaito through.

Its appendage met little resistance as it pierced through his flesh and bone.

"Master Kaito!"

"My word!"

Hina screamed, and Lute looked up at Kaito in astonishment. A moment later, though, a sliver of relief spread across Hina's face.

Kaito had given her a nod. The Kaiser would be in trouble if his contractor died. The throw had been highly precise, and the part that had gotten stabbed was Kaito's right shoulder. Given all those facts, Kaito's life wasn't in much danger.

*Nice throw, Kaiser!*

Then Kaito turned back toward the machine and grabbed on to its feeler with his beastly left arm. Purposefully gouging his wound, he ripped out a chunk of his flesh.

Blood spurted forth, and he dashed the red, mana-rich liquid all over the machine's body.

When he did, his blood began seeping into the spaces between the sheets of metal.

After verifying that he had done what he needed, he let go of the feeler. He snapped his fingers as he began making his descent.

*"La (overflow)."*

Instantly, his blood transformed into water. Then, using Kaito's pain and mana as its fuel, the water began growing.

As it expanded, the water filled up and pressed against the gaps between the metal slabs. The internal pressure proved too much for the machine to bear. The links between the sheets crumbled in an instant.

The water took that opportunity to freeze over.

The machine had been transformed into a spherical chunk of ice. Its metal sheets, separated and in disarray, were imprisoned within. The block of ice collapsed onto the grassy ground with a *thunk*. It showed no signs that it would ever move again.

At a glance, the individual sheets of metal didn't individually have enough power to break out of Kaito's ice after all.

"Got 'em!"

Kaito nodded in satisfaction. Nobody but him had gotten hurt. He'd been able to keep the number of victims to a minimum, just like he'd planned. Hina would probably be livid, though. He turned around, intending to apologize to her.

When he did, he saw Lute charging toward him with the ferocity of a raging bull.

"Youuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!"

"Well, that's a surprise."

He was even letting out an enraged cry for some reason. Kaito blinked rapidly.

All the fur on Lute's body was bristling as he grabbed Kaito's arm, and it remained that way as he inspected Kaito's wound. Upon seeing the vast amount of blood gushing out, he spat out orders to his subordinates.

"Bring over the bandages and magical salve! Hurry!"

"I-I'm fine. You really don't need to go that far. And I can more or less use healing magic myself, so..."

"Even so, just what do you think you're doing? In front of your wife! I hardly think someone who prides themselves on being a devoted husband should cause their wife such worry!"

Lute shouted at him. Kaito nodded, suddenly understanding. But it looked like that wasn't the only reason for his anger. Lute scratched violently at his head, as though to demonstrate how irritated he was.

"Damn how feckless I am! To think you would risk your life for us so! How am I ever supposed to repay such kindness?!"

Although he was clearly vexed, Lute seemed to be feeling somewhat ashamed. Kaito was at a loss for what to say. If he told Lute not to worry about it, it would undoubtedly have the opposite effect.

For starters, he once again turned down the magical salve that Lute's subordinates had brought him; the beastfolk had few magicians among their numbers, so it was likely quite valuable to them. Instead, he applied healing magic to his shoulder himself.

The wound closed up without a hitch. But after seeing the way Kaito's skin had knitted together, Lute put forth a proposal.

"We should pay a visit to our headquarters. You'd best get that looked at by a medical specialist, just to be on the safe side."

"I appreciate it, but...is it really okay for you to take me there?"

"Please! It pains me that you would think us such unfeeling monsters! Know this, Sir Kaito! Our people place far more pride in repaying debts than humans do!"

Visibly indignant, Lute let out a shout that seemed vaguely rude to humans.

His subordinates hurriedly got to work drawing a teleportation circle atop the grassy earth. Based on how quickly they'd reacted, it didn't seem like any of them opposed the notion. Apparently, Kaito's conduct had yielded unforeseen effects.

*It looks like they trust me now, I guess... Huh.*

As he sat there dumbfounded, a number of empty-handed beastfolk approached the block of ice.

They had no way of knowing if the machine had been alone, so there was no way they could pass up this chance to gather important information on their foe. But after consulting with his comrades, a single gray wolf with a sturdy physique broke off from the group and moved away from the ice.

As he approached Kaito, he called out to him worriedly.

"It might be sealed up, but doesn't your wound still hurt? Here, let me give you a hand."

"No, no, I can walk on my— Hwah!"

"While we're grateful for your concern, the two of us will be fine on our own. I shall carry Master Kaito."

"H-Hina?"

Before he'd had a chance to react, Hina had scooped him up and was carrying him under her arm. As he hung embraced by her slender arm, his eyes darted about.

The gray wolf gave her a sympathetic smile and a short bow. Then, clearly not wanting to get involved in a lover's quarrel, he quickly left the two of them alone.

Kaito timidly glanced up at Hina's face. Her shapely lips were tightly pursed.

Not looking toward him, she murmured quietly.

"For now, I shall say nothing. But Master Kaito, do know that I intend to get quite upset at you later."

"I'm, uh, I'm sorry. Really, I am."

Kaito reflexively slumped. A human laugh resounded deep in his eardrums.

*"You know, I find myself thinking this somewhat frequently, but as far as human males go, you really are quite pathetic."*

Kaito, to his credit, tried to offer a rebuttal. But the moment he opened his mouth, Hina broke into a run toward the men who'd just finished drawing their teleportation circle. After nearly biting his tongue, Kaito decided to shut up.

As his bride carried him at a brisk dash, he cast a sidelong glance at the block of ice.

Then, all of a sudden, he realized something.

Deus Ex Machina.

He *had* seen something similar to it since coming to this world.

The Boondock Saints.

A titan of blades that only the Torture Princess could create.

*...That's what that thing looked like.*

However, as far as figuring out what it all meant, Kaito hadn't the foggiest.





# 3 A Brief Reprieve

F r e a m d T o r t u r e c h a n





### 3

## A Brief Reprieve

The Torture Princess had returned once more to her castle atop its hill of craggy stone.

Her sleek black hair was splayed across her sheets as she slept.

After all, there was nothing she needed to do at the moment, nor, for that matter, anything she could.

Her target, the Kaiser's contractor, was currently in nonhuman lands, a place where she couldn't carelessly venture. Ever since she'd discovered that fact, she'd been spending her time idly. But although she was lying down, Elisabeth was not, in fact, asleep.

She was finding the deafening silence hard on her ears, leaving her unable to get any rest.

And so, as she lay on her bed, events from the past bubbled up in her mind.

Once, Elisabeth Le Fanu had stood in silence among a raging torrent of jeers.

Having been forced to wear a straitjacket and stand in the public square, she'd found herself the subject of a terrifying amount of hatred. And before that, her narrow, cramped cell had been so quiet that there was a chance it had had an effect on her psyche.

Even after the Church had returned her castle to her, she still hadn't had anyone to talk to.

Until the day she summoned a Sinless Soul as a servant to foist various chores and responsibilities upon.

"Who would have thought I'd end up reeling in someone from another world?"

Elisabeth's tone was sardonic. It had been a coincidence of astronomic proportions, one that verged on a miracle. But the way she saw it now, it had hardly ended up being a joyful one.

After all, Kaito Sena was a colossal fool.

He was stupid man, unthinkably good-natured, naive, and possessing an unparalleled sense of stubbornness. For the sake of someone wholly undeserving of being saved by him, he'd even made a contract with a demon and endured unspeakable pain.

If anyone asked Elisabeth what she thought of his behavior, she would probably describe it as the most foolish act anyone had ever committed.

*"You know, you're the only one who ever saved me."*

That was what Kaito Sena had told her. She had forcibly summoned his soul when all he'd wanted was to die, gotten him wrapped up in her demon hunt, and warped his very destiny, and he'd *thanked* her.

*"The only one who saved me from that hell was the Torture Princess. Just you, Elisabeth Le Fanu."*

*What a truly, truly pitiable man you are.*

She considered something, and not for the first time.

Kaito Sena was like a faithful mutt. And because he'd been starving, wounded, and shivering, it didn't matter how the person who picked him up and took him inside treated him. He would think highly of them regardless.

It was true that there had been some joyous aspects to his second life. He'd met Hina, for one. But it was ludicrous to think of someone as your savior just because they tossed you a few sandy scraps of bread when you were starving.

Due to his own misfortune, Kaito Sena had found value in someone he ought not have.

And if that wasn't worthy of being called pitiable, then what could possibly be?

He'd even taken the Torture Princess out on a date, for crying out loud.

And he'd told her that even if every single other person scorned her, he would hold her in higher esteem than anyone else in the world.

"What a fool he is. What a hopeless, irredeemable fool. The largest idiot in all the world."

*"I like her a whole lot."*

*"For that person's sake, I could do or become anything."*

Then Kaito Sena had chosen to become an enemy of the entire world.

The mere normal, human boy who knew nothing of magic had done it ever so innocently.

In a sense, he'd been like a child looking up to a hero. That was how trivial his reason had been.

Elisabeth ground her teeth. Then, like a child, she curled into a ball.

The oppressive stillness around her persisted, causing her chilly bedroom to feel like the inside of a coffin. Nothing in it moved. Nothing in it changed. But then, all of a sudden, it underwent a transformation.

Some sort of pleasant aroma wafted up.

Actually, it was rather smoky.

She could even make out the sound of something crackling.

"...Wait. Hold on a moment, now."

Elisabeth sprang up from the bed.

A vigorous fire was burning directly before her eyes.

"A fire?!"

"Oh-ho, I see you've awoken! Nothing is burning, no—it's a splendid bonfire!"

Somebody was sitting in front of the fire, turning around in response to her alarm. His face was concealed underneath his tattered black cloak, and

he was gently flapping a feathered fan. Atop the fire was a massive cut of meat hanging from a pair of tripods.

Drops of fat were dribbling off its carefully seared surface.

"What in the blazes do you think you're doing, Butcher?"

"Why, I'm roasting some meat in someone else's castle!"

"And to think, you even *realized* it belonged to another."

Elisabeth instinctively narrowed her eyes in exasperation.

Ever since the Marquis had destroyed its shutters, her bedroom's window had been left perpetually open. The smoke was drifting through it, finding its way outside. But the ventilation it provided had been the only thing standing between her and becoming the victim of a murder. The Butcher's hearty laugh made it wholly unclear whether or not that fact had registered with him.

"I must say, though. I caught wind of the commotion at the Capital! 'How dreadful,' I thought, and after dealing with this and that, and stocking up on some things, I raced over here like an arrow!"

"The slowest arrow there ever was."

"At any rate, Madam Elisabeth, I daresay you haven't been eating anything decent since that hubbub, eh?"

The Butcher's tone didn't waver a note as he carried on. Elisabeth's shoulders twitched.

He was completely right. She was, by nature, a glutton and a gourmand. But ever since Kaito and Hina had left, she'd only taken in the bare minimum amount of sustenance necessary for survival.

Unfazed by her lack of a reply, the Butcher continued turning the massive slab of meat. After adjusting its position, he nodded, pleased. Then he stylishly sprinkled salt on it from oddly high in the air.

"Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho, my meats are the finest meats around! Filled with love and bravery, they'll never let you down! Eat them and your courage will increase one millionfold! As always, I'm your friendly neighborhood Butcher! Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"Oy, Butcher. Quit the singing. It's dreadful."

"My goodness, how could you say such a thing? My voice has the timbre of a lovely baby bird!"

"The world may never know where that confidence of yours wells from. And on that note, why on earth are you trespassing in my castle?"

"As I told Mr. Dim-Witted Servant and Ms. Lovely Maid once before, it brings me great joy when you cry out how exquisite something is. Allowing a customer of mine to go hungry would besmirch my honor as a merchant."

The Butcher spoke with a persistent calm. Elisabeth gazed silently at his back.

Then she recalled a scene from some time ago.

Back at a bar in the Capital, Kaito had offered her a bowl of gruel, a bowl that he'd gone well out of his way to bring her. "I figured you might be hungry," he'd said to the Torture Princess.

Elisabeth posed a subdued question to the Butcher.

"...And that was your sole reason for coming?"

"Why, yes. That, and nothing else."

The Butcher nodded in a dignified manner, and Elisabeth found herself at a loss for words. The flames gave off dazzling lights as they cracked and popped.

As he checked to make sure the meat had been properly cooked, the Butcher went on.

"No matter what the times may bring us, one must always remember to eat. That's what it means to be alive, you know. And it's a merchant's role to deliver the provisions for a meal. And besides, meat is ever so splendid. Even when one feels lonely, some good meat will get them right back on their feet."

"And just who is it you're saying is lonely, pray tell?"

"Oh my, no, I was merely recounting my own experiences. Time spent alone tends to pass in an eerily slow fashion."

As he shook his head, the Butcher thrust an iron skewer through the slab of meat. When he pulled the skewer free, clear liquid gushed out. Satisfied with the meat's state, he lowered it off the flame.

Then, grabbing it by the bone, he held it in the air triumphantly.

"And there you have it!"

"Hmm."

"And my, what a surprise, what a delight! Grilled arm of troll!"

"Are you sure you didn't mean to say 'What a fright!'?"

"Now, now, dig in!"

Not discouraged in the slightest by Elisabeth's quip, the Butcher held the meat out to her as she sat cross-legged on the bed. She took it, albeit with some dismay. Meaty juices began dripping down onto her sheets.

"Hmm... Hmhm..."

Elisabeth stared intently at the slab of meat. Now that she examined it closer, it really did seem to be a troll's arm. It didn't, by any stretch of the imagination, look appetizing. But the skin was cooked crisp and juicy, and it was letting off an entirely reasonable aroma.

And above all else, the Butcher was standing in front of her and practically bubbling with excitement.

Reflexively, she glanced from side to side. But to her misfortune and moderate annoyance, there was nobody present but her to offer retorts. The array of knives resting in the map on the wall glinted in vain.

Steeling herself, Elisabeth opened her mouth wide and thrust the meat in.

Then she chomped down on it with surprising vigor.

"'Tis vile!"

"Whaaaat?!"

Elisabeth's judgment was immediate, and the Butcher hopped up and down to protest it.



She furrowed her brows as far as they would go. In ill humor, she began listing off her impressions.

"The skin is aromatic and crispy, and its rough, wild texture is halfway decent! But the taste, the crucial element, is completely off! 'Tis unlike beef, nor is it like pork, chicken, goat, or sheep! What causes it to possess this bizarre, muddy flavor?! I can find no words to describe it besides *troll-like!*"

"Hmm, well, it is troll, after all."

"If I had to describe it with a color, I would say it tasted green!"

Filled with anger as she was, Elisabeth didn't stop eating. The feeling of food making its way into her empty stomach was incredibly pleasant. She stuffed her cheeks with meat, complaining all the while.

"Why, should I, have to, eat, something, so, vile?!"

Just as one would have expected, troll meat had a truly, truly bizarre flavor to it.

As she worked her way through the meat, she thought back to her dining habits of old.

Everything Hina had made had been exquisite. And although Kaito's cooking was generally dreadful, the *purin* he made, if nothing else, was perfection. But now she was gnawing at a troll's arm, all on her own.

*What on earth has become of me?*

Elisabeth bit into the skin, tore at the meat, and shredded the tendons with her teeth.

All the while, she was steadily growing angrier and angrier.

*Forget all this nonsense about enemies and allies, killing and saving! There is a matter that most surely takes precedence!*

Kaito Sena had decided to become an enemy of the world. Saying it was for Elisabeth's sake, he'd taken Hina and left without consulting anyone else. Then he'd begun walking down the path of a figure destined to be reviled and cursed.

Who, exactly, was supposed to benefit from that outcome?

Now that she thought about it coolly, there were countless things she wanted to say to the two of them.

Her heart was full to the brim with a terrifying amount of complaints and abusive remarks she wanted to level at them.

But most of all, she needed to give Kaito a solid punch to the face.

Then she needed to ask him to give it a rest and to put an end to his idiocy.

*Aye—everything else can come after that.*

The Church had ordered Elisabeth Le Fanu to kill Kaito Sena.

She held certain convictions that were immutable. But Kaito probably wouldn't give up, either. No matter how hard they struggled against their fate, in the end, coming to blows with each other was the only path open to them. She had a duty to kill the enemy of the world. But before she surrendered herself to that tragic fate, she was going to give Kaito a solid kick in the pants.

Now was no time to be feeling glad that he'd left the human territories, nor was it any time to be sleeping.

Her foe was the most foolish servant in all the world. She needed to do what must be done.

And with that thought in mind, Elisabeth gulped down the last of the meat.

"CHAAAH!"

Nothing remained but the splendid bone. With excellent form, she held it up high and hurled it. It spun through the air as it made its way out the window.

The bone gleamed as it faded from view.

With fists clenched and her expression contorted by anger, Elisabeth shouted out.

"Damn you! Why should I be forced to eat something so vile! And why must my thoughts be filled with such distress! I shan't forgive you for this, Kaito, you bastard. I shall hunt you down and have your head!"

"Hmm, it seems as though the odds that Mr. Servant meets an untimely demise have risen somewhat, haven't they...?"

The Butcher crossed his arms. Elisabeth's indignation and bloodlust were boiling over before his very eyes.

Then, gladdened by the fact that she seemed to have regained her vigor, if nothing else, he reached into his sack and pulled out a fresh chunk of meat.

"My, my, my, what do we have here? Why, it's a dragon tail!"

"This foolishness again?"

And with that, for the first time in a long time, Elisabeth's castle felt alive again.



"...What the hell is a 'troll-like' flavor?!"

"Oh, Master Kaito, you're awake! What's the matter?"

"Wh—oh, sorry, Hina. I guess I was just having a weird dream."

Kaito pressed down on his forehead. It would appear he'd fallen asleep at some point. Because of that, and because he'd expended enough of his own mana that Elisabeth's blood had kicked in, he'd seen some sort of weird dream. He spent a moment pondering what significance the phrase *troll-like flavor* could possibly have.

Then he slowly sat up, turning his attention away from the dream to his surroundings.

The room he was in was made of wood, and it had a number of white beds lined up within it. It wasn't clear how they'd pulled it all off, but its walls sported authentic vines, and its ceiling displayed an array of dainty pink flowers.

The room's construction had clearly been designed to put nature's beauty front and center.

The fragrance of the flowers also seemed to have a sterilizing effect. Their aroma was sweet, but it had a sting to it as well.

Hina was sitting atop a wicker chair at his side. On his other side, he was flanked by a goatperson wearing gloves and a sanitary cloth mask.

Then he noticed the thick bandages wrapped around his shoulder. The beastman healer gave a slight nod.

"The wound had sealed almost completely before I even began treatment. Very impressive. But your skin was thin in places, so I applied herbs to help speed along your recovery. You passed out due to a mana deficiency and some mild fatigue. You should be all better now. Feel free to get up and move around as you please."

"Oh, Master Kaito, thank goodness! Thank goodness!"

Hina cast her arms wide and squeezed Kaito in a tight embrace. Bewildered, he glanced at the healer.

The goatperson, who was more than likely a goatwoman given the size and shape of her horns, offered a nurturing smile.

"I told her there was nothing to worry about, you know. But even so, your wife waited by your side on the verge of tears, not leaving you alone for a moment. Do you have anything you'd like to say to her?"

"Sorry, Hina. I guess I really gave you a scare there, huh?"

Kaito gently returned her hug, repeatedly stroking his wife's back.

As she gradually calmed down, Kaito rummaged through his memories.

*So, uh... I definitely remember getting on that teleportation circle Lute and the others drew...*

After he had, they'd traveled to a gorgeous building artisanally crafted out of wood and colored stone. According to Lute and the others, it was one of the royal family's secondary residences. Then they'd led him to the infirmary that had been set up in one of the rooms.

Upon obeying the healer's instruction and lying down on a bed, he'd immediately passed out.

"Wait a minute, a secondary residence of the royal family?"

Kaito opened his eyes wide. This wasn't just some hospital they'd been brought to.

Flustered, he made to get down off the bed. But he found himself unable to move.

At some point, Hina had anchored her slender arms firmly around him.

"Um, uh... Hina dearest?"

"Why yes, Master Kaito? I believe I did tell you that I intended to get quite upset at you later."

It seemed her frustration wasn't just talk. Kaito's face went stiff. But then Hina loosened her arms. After taking a step back, she fixed him with a pointed stare.

Then she made her pained appeal.

"Haven't I told you? When you go off on your own and do such dangerous things, my love... Do you have any idea how much that determination of yours makes me want to kill my powerless self?"

Hina's face contorted, just like it had back when the two of them had had their fight back at the castle. Immeasurable grief was welling up within her jeweled eyes. Her expression made it clear how much her concern for her bridegroom had been eating away at her heart.

Struck by realization, Kaito reached his own arms out. He hugged Hina tight.

*It was the best option we had.*

That was something he still wholeheartedly believed.

He wasn't the same man he'd once been. If he needed Hina's help, he had no problems asking for it. And this time, he hadn't. That was all there had been to it. But he also realized why Hina didn't find that answer satisfactory.

They were a couple. They'd promised to become a family.

There was no excuse for hurting her the way he had.

"Hina, I'm really, really sorry—huh? Is it just me, or are you squeezing me again?"

"Hee-hee-hee, it seems you still need some scolding. But, um, Ms. Healer? Is Master Kaito stable enough to hold long conversations?"

"Oh, very much so. And for patients prone to recklessness, being scolded by a family member is often the best medicine. Please, don't mind me. Go ahead and be as hard on him as you want."

"What kind of doctor are you?"

He'd been ambushed from a wholly unexpected direction.

Hina brought her lips close to Kaito's ear, then blew gently on his earlobe.

A shiver ran down his body, and Hina began seductively whispering harsh words.

"Are you listening to me, Master Kaito? Battles constantly bring about unexpected developments. But even when time is of the essence, I forbid you from acting on your own. Even with the prowess you've attained in magic, you still have next to no combat experience. I am your sword and your shield, and you should make use of me whenever possible."

Hina earnestly laid out her arguments. Their contents were sound, and more than reasonable at that. Kaito also felt a little like he was getting brainwashed. By the end, all he found he could say was, "I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

Then the wooden door opened. A wolfman warrior stuck his nose in the gap and sniffed.

"Sir Kaito, how are you feeling? I'd heard you'd woken—oh, my apologies, I seem to be intruding."

"No, no, you aren't intruding! Come save me, Lute!"

"I beg your pardon. Do you find yourself in the need of assistance?"

Kaito gave a frantic shout. Lute stepped into the infirmary, his head tilted to the side in confusion.

Hina reluctantly drew away from Kaito. Then, after clearing her throat, she picked up the fruit that had been left by Kaito's bedside. Slipping a knife out of her cuff, she began peeling it.

After listening to what the two of them had to say, Lute burst into laughter.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Well, if that isn't mutual love for you. What a relief that your wounds didn't amount to anything too serious! It seems your wife already scolded you for your recklessness, so I suppose there isn't much reason for me to say anything more on that front."

"Oh yeah. She gave me a good earful."

"You really only have yourself to blame. Whenever I get hurt, my lovely wife here gets just as upset."

"Wait, this is your wife?!"

Kaito let out a hysteric shout in spite of himself. Her mouth still hidden beneath cloth, the goatwoman healer waved at him. The gesture was playful, but her expression was as stoic as ever. Apparently, Lute's wife was a much more levelheaded person than Kaito had imagined she'd be.

After grinning widely and returning her wave, Lute turned back toward Kaito.

"Ahem. Now then, Sir Kaito, if you have no objections, there's someone I'd like to bring you to meet."

"Someone'?"

Kaito parroted the word Lute had said, confused. It was then that he remembered the mind-boggling fact that they were currently in one of the royal family's secondary residences. He reflexively corrected his posture. As he did, Hina lifted a chunk of fruit to his mouth. "Say 'aah,' Master Kaito." Unable to refuse, he munched on the white flesh.

Although the situation had taken a turn for the comical, Kaito could still clearly make out Lute's following words.

"Lady Vyade Ula Forstlast. My master, and the second imperial princess of the Forest King."



The beastfolk had three kings.

They were the progenitors of all beastfolk: the Forest King, an ancient wolf; the Water King, a white deer; and the Wind King, a colossal hawk.

When the world had been remade, the Saint had prayed to God and created three intersex beasts. Their children were just as diverse as the rest of the beasts, and they worked to increase the beastman population and protect the land they'd been given.

Ever since then, the three of them had kept on living. Their existence was one of the primary reasons why faith in the Saint hadn't found much

popularity among the beastfolk—they lived under the protection of beings of legend to this very day.

Because of that, it was only natural that they didn't revere the Saint to the degree humans did.

At present, the three kings lived and ate together, herbivore and carnivores alike, in order to prevent inter-beastman conflict, act as symbols of unity, and preserve the peace. But while they still contributed to society, the three of them had ceded power.

They had reigned since time immemorial. But they no longer governed.

Instead, they'd chosen several members from each tribe and appointed them as royalty, granting them authority and leaving matters of national politics to them.

And one such member of this nobility was Vyade Ula Forstlast, the second imperial princess of the Forest King.

The power she wielded was less than that of the first imperial prince or the first imperial princess. However, she had a private army in order to deal with matters of public security, and the way she'd used her own funds to maintain the towns under her supervision and manage the systems preventing the rivers from flooding had earned her the moniker of the Wise Wolf.

In fact, the zealous support she received from the populace surpassed that of even the first imperial prince.

And at present, she was sitting directly in front of Kaito.

*How the heck did things even get to this point?*

Faced with her majestic visage, Kaito's mind was awirl.

The lighting throughout the entire audience chamber was dim. Furthermore, the room's delicately embroidered curtains cast whimsical shadows atop the stairs leading up to the throne. Their large floral design was gorgeous, yet at the same time, possessed the same solemnity a large, aging beast would. Concealed behind them, though, lurked a number of dangerous presences.

A number of soldiers were standing at attention, weapons held at the ready. Their nervousness was palpable.

*You can't blame 'em, given that their master is meeting face-to-face with a demon's contractor.*

On high alert yet seemingly defenseless at first glance, Vyade sat atop the throne and smiled.

She was a wolfwoman, and one with fur as white as the driven snow. The insides of her triangular ears were a lovely shade of pink, and a flower crown was perched between them. Her elbows were sitting atop beautifully arranged floral armrests. Just like the curtains, the layers of cloth she was wearing were delicately embroidered as well. As Kaito knelt in front of her, she called out gently to him.

"A pleasure to meet you, Sir Kaito Sena, our visitor from another world. I wish to extend my gratitude for your earlier efforts."









"Yes, uh, ma'am. It's a...great honor?"

"There's no need to be so stiff. We would never dream of forcing our etiquette on a visitor of another race, much less one from another world. Please, be at ease."

Vyade's words were kind. Even after being told that, though, Kaito stumbled over his response.

Due to his experiences in his past life, Kaito held a certain amount of distrust and antipathy toward public authority. But the nervousness this woman was sparking in him was of another type altogether. It was the first time Kaito had ever found himself wondering if it was really all right for someone like him to be talking to a person of her status.

*I guess there really are places where you can find people who've been aristocrats their whole lives.*

"Or could it be that you're unaccustomed to beastfolk? If that's the problem, then, here."

A hard, clicking noise rang out. The air in front of Kaito began gently shifting.

A gentle fragrance floated up, and the soldiers' stress became even more pronounced.

Whether he wanted to or not, Kaito immediately sensed what had happened.

Vyade had come down from the throne and was currently stooping in front of him. As he panicked over what best to do, he quickly found that his hand had been taken. A wolfish hand—one that, much like a human's, had five long fingers—was wrapped around his. It was covered in soft, white fur and sported a pad in the middle of its palm.

If Kaito was allowed to be completely blunt, it was squishy, and felt kind of nice.

"How do you find it?"

Vyade gave a small laugh. Taken wholly aback, Kaito raised his face.

His gaze was met with a beautiful pair of blue eyes. Vyade showed him a warm smile.

"Ah, you finally looked me in the eyes. I really must thank you, you know. You fought for the sake of our people, not even hesitating to receive wounds. And as for you..."

Suddenly, she cast her gaze to his side. As she did, Kaito received a shock. Hina was watching Vyade grasp his hand, and the look in her eyes was terrifying. Kaito broke out into a cold sweat. But Vyade just gave a small chuckle, before reaching out her other hand toward Hina. Then she caressed Hina's cheek as one would to comfort a child.

"I must thank you as well, Madam Hina. Your efforts were indispensable."

"I—I am my beloved Master Kaito's maid! It was all Master Kaito's doing, so...I am undeserving of your kind words."

"Hmhm. Now that the two of you have been kind enough to look at me, let us speak of what is to come."

Vyade lightly rose to her feet. Then, with the springy footsteps of a young girl, she returned to the throne. But as soon as she reassumed her rightful seat, she swathed herself once more in majesty and dignity.

As he watched her, Kaito found himself dumbfounded.

Vyade was a wolfwoman who gave off a strange impression. She seemed like both a teenage girl and a woman over a century old. Humans had difficulty gauging beastfolk's ages in general, but hers was even more of an enigma.

Then she looked down on them with gravitas befitting the second imperial princess of the Forest King.

"We've carefully removed those sheets of metal from within the block of ice and run some tests on them. However, at the moment, our technology is proving insufficient to determine much, other than the fact that their material seems impossible to reproduce. I find it unlikely that we'll derive much useful information from the remaining specimens going forward, either. And we still have no guarantee that only one of those things exists."

"Yeah, I thought of that, too. Even if it can change its form, there's no way it committed all those massacres single-handedly."

"Consequently, I wish to ask for your continued sojourn and cooperation until we can definitively state that we've put a stop to the massacres. We need to determine that thing's true nature and, if it has one, who its master is."

Upon hearing what Vyade had to say, Kaito narrowed his eyes.

That was no doubt the reason she'd used such innocent-seeming methods to demonstrate her affection for them. She'd been very intentionally trying to get Kaito and Hina to feel a bond toward the beastfolk.

*Depending on what master that thing serves, it might even have intended to start a war between these guys and the humans.*

After a few seconds of deliberation, Kaito chose his words carefully.

"You know, I really do think that thing came from a demon."

The Kaiser had declared it had nothing to do with demons. But Kaito was intentionally keeping that fact to himself.

He'd decided he needed to do whatever he could to prevent a war from breaking out.

Although it seemed she'd guessed at his true intentions, Vyade replied with a calm nod.

"No matter what race they originally hail from, a demon's contractor is an enemy of all who live in this world. If our foe truly is a new contractor, we'll need to send notice to the human side as well. Truly, we need to find out what that thing was, and quickly. You yourself may be a contractor as well, but your soul is a proud one. For lending us aid yet harming none, Sir

Kaito, you are a great friend to us indeed. We would ask that you continue lending us your strength going forward; what do you say?"

Vyade smiled, as though to encourage a favorable response. While it was unclear if the smile itself was genuine or not, the confidence and trust it contained clearly were. Kaito nodded. Genuine or not, his choice was the same.

It was all too clear what he needed to do.

"I'll stop the killings and find out who our enemy really is. And until we're done, I'll give you all the help you need."

"You have our gratitude. For now, that will be more than enough. Once we're finished, depending on how things end, we can negotiate from there. But as for today, I'm sure you're tired. Fia, would you show them the way?"

A rabbit-headed lady-in-waiting standing nearby nodded. Her ears flopped as she bowed to Kaito and Hina, after which she gestured for them to stand.

The two of them gave Vyade deep bows, then followed after Fia.

The imperial princess's soft voice called out to them from behind.

"I hope you two will believe in me, Sir Kaito and Madam Hina, when I say I wish for us to be close friends. And we wish to remain good neighbors to the humans as well. That is precisely why we must quell this distressing situation."

"Don't worry, Your Highness. We believe you."

Kaito gave a courteous response. And in truth, he suspected that everything she'd said had been true.

As Fia led them through the building, Kaito thought back to what Lute had told him. Apparently, the second imperial princess was a calm, levelheaded individual. That was in stark contrast to the first imperial princess and third imperial prince, both of whom were allegedly hot-blooded and fixated on expanding the beastfolk territories.

Vyade, the second imperial princess, hadn't informed the two of the killings. That was precisely the reason why she'd needed to call in Kaito, a third party, to act as her pawn. The fact of the matter was, she had made stopping the massacres her top priority. In other words, her desire to avoid war was genuine.

She had no desire to send the beastfolk to ruin, nor to see the forest desecrated.

And Kaito felt the same way. He didn't want to see anyone have to get hurt or suffer.

*Deus Ex Machina.*

In order to achieve that, he needed to find out that thing's true nature as quickly as possible.

What was the killer secretly hoping to achieve?

Or what were they trying to start?

\*

"Hey, Kaiser... Kaiser, can you hear me?"



After the lady-in-waiting led them to their guest room, Kaito called out to his demon as he sat atop the bed. However, there was no reply. The Kaiser was proud, and fickle to boot. Because Kaito had repeatedly called on him for matters of little importance in recent memory, he seemed to have chosen to completely obscure his form.

Kaito probably wouldn't be able to ask him about Deus Ex Machina until the following day, at the earliest.

"Seriously, why do you have to be such a pain in the ass?"

Undeterred, Kaito tried to play on the Kaiser's emotions. Even so, there was no reply. It would appear the Kaiser had completely blocked out his master's voice. The jewel in Kaito's pocket containing Vlad's soul rattled around, as though expressing its amusement. But Kaito had no business with Vlad, so he completely ignored him in turn.

"Dammit, why now?"

Sighing, Kaito adjusted his seat on the bed.

Then the door to the room opened, and Hina stuck her head in.

"How did it go, Master Kaito? Any response?"

"Nah, nothing. Doesn't look like he's planning on chatting today."

Then Kaito gasped.

Hina tilted her head as she stood before him. Her damp silver hair rustled.

"Is something the matter?"

Her outfit was a complete one-eighty from her usual maid uniform.

Before settling down in the guest room, Hina had decided to take a bath. She was an automaton, so she didn't normally need to take baths, but the lady-in-waiting had offered her one anyway, suggesting it might be nice to wipe the dirt from her body and use some of their scented oils.

Kaito had been in favor as well, so she'd been away from the room until her return moments ago.

Currently, her supple white skin was dressed in a thin, floral-patterned negligee. The exotic garment's soft hem fluttered as Hina did a little twirl.

"Ah, did I catch you by surprise? My maid outfit had gotten a bit dirty, so they were kind enough to let me borrow this. Is it unseemly, do you think?"

"You're so pretty."

"Wh—?!"

"Ah, sorry. Err, I mean, I'm not *sorry*. It just kinda slipped out."

Kaito pressed down on his quickly reddening face.

Hina blinked rapidly. A moment later, her cheeks went bright red as well. She began bashfully fidgeting as she tripped over her words.

"M-Master Kaito, y-you really mustn't attack me b-by surprise like that. It's really quite unfair."

"I mean, I wasn't *trying* to attack you by surprise or anything. One minute I was thinking it, and before I knew it, I was saying it."

"That's what'sh sho unfair about it... Now I can't even talg write... Ohhhhh, how embarrassing."

Hina crouched and balled herself up like a pill bug. Kaito watched her, finding it adorable.

Eventually, after burying her head all the way down in her arms for some reason, Hina whispered softly.

".....I'm so happy that I could die."

"No, wait, don't do that. I'd really rather you kept on liv...ing..."

It was at that moment that Kaito realized the important dilemma the two of them were now in. He frantically cast his gaze around the room.

Much like the other rooms, the guest room's stone walls were adorned with vegetation. In fact, beastfolk held nature in such regard that they didn't normally build buildings out of stone at all. But due to the climate and their use of fire, they'd searched for an appropriate material and eventually settled on a unique strategy of mixing stone with various other materials.

The room they were occupying was simply another one of the fruits of that technique.

Its windows were large and arranged so as to allow as much sunlight in as possible. At the moment, though, it was covered by the largest pelt Kaito had ever seen. It looked like it was designed to be rolled up when the weather was nice. A mattress stuffed with hay was placed atop the wooden bed, as were a number of blankets. All of them, along with the carpet on the floors, were decorated with intricate embroidery.

And on top of all that, the room was impressively spacious. It would no doubt have been a pleasant place to while away the hours.

However, it had an important problem to it as well.

*Th-there's only one bed.*

In other words, at this rate, Kaito and Hina would end up sleeping together.

In his mind, Kaito could imagine Lute giving a hearty laugh. Upon hearing they were married, Lute had probably thought it the tactful thing to do. But his good deed had, in fact, been gravely unnecessary.

Kaito and Hina had slept in the same bed once before. But now that they'd confirmed their feelings for each other, he doubted it'd end at just that, nor did he have faith in his ability to stop there.

At a loss for what to do, Kaito looked around the room again.

Luckily, the carpet was thick. If he snagged one of the blankets off the bed, it would be more than comfortable enough to sleep on.

*Nice! I can just sleep on the floor, and then we're all good!*

As Kaito clenched his fists, having made his decision, though, he noticed something.

*That's...huh?*

He'd finally noticed that Hina was acting strangely. She'd stood up at some point and was staring a hole into the bed while deep in thought.

"Hina, what's the matter?"

"Well, Master Kaito..."

"Hmm?"

"We *are* married, you know."

Kaito broke into a violent coughing fit.

He certainly wasn't dense enough to miss what she was implying. Flustered, he opened his mouth, then thought twice and closed it tight. Insecurity was welling up in Hina's big green eyes.

Her gaze was imploring, and hopelessly forlorn.

Kaito narrowed his gaze a smidge, then thought back to the earnest words Hina had once said to him.

*"I wish...to become a family with you...Master Kaito."*

She'd broken her body on his behalf, even going so far as to lose her arms and legs, and that had been the one wish she'd made of him.

And his teary reply had been thus:

*"You've always been... The moment we met, you became my companion, right?"*

And that was how, at the end of that battle, after making the insane choice he had,

Kaito Sena had finally found a family.

"Master Kaito, if you don't find it objectionable... I think it would be an appropriate time to, you know..."

Hina gripped her clothes tightly as she spoke. Her voice trembled as she went on.

"...Do you...not want to?"

Then her nervousness finally surpassed her limits, and her cheeks flushed the reddest they had yet.

Completely losing her usual assertiveness, she shook her head in a panic.

"I—I apologize for being so forward! I will take the floor, so please forget I said—"

"Hina!"

Kaito abruptly grabbed her slender wrists. Her expression turned to one of shock.

Although he was on the verge of insisting on sleeping on the floor himself, Kaito shut his mouth. That wasn't it.

*No! That's not what I'm supposed to say here!*

Silently, the two of them stared at each other. Her eyes were as moist as a puppy's. About to reflexively look away, Kaito resisted the urge and opened his mouth. But at the last moment, he couldn't get the words out.

Hina gently hung her head. When she did, though, Kaito silently pulled her toward himself.

Then he hugged her tight.

"M-Master Kaito?"

Hina's voice was shrill. As he listened to it, Kaito felt his vision blur.

The palpitations of his heart and the sounds of Hina's gears were deafening. For a moment, he was concerned the two of them were both just

going to drop dead like that. But then Hina returned his hug, squeezing so hard that she was practically hanging on to him, and he knew he'd made the right choice.

*She's right. We are married.*

In sickness and in health, no matter what dangers befell them.

Until death did them part, Kaito and Hina planned to stay together.

"Hina, I'm never gonna let go of you again. That way, we'll never be apart."

"Master Kaito, I'm undeserving of such blessed words. I'm so, so very happy right now. I feel like I'm in a dream."

"So, I'll, uh...um... I wonder what I'm supposed to say now."

"Give it your best try, Master Kaito!"

"I'm trying! I am! So, I'll, uh... You know, after this, I want to spend the rest of my life with you. And I promise to take good care of you! So..."

Then Kaito extended out his arms and suddenly let go of Hina. She was a good bit taller than he, and as he looked up at her face, he saw her waiting for him to finish with a serious expression on her face.

Kaito inhaled, exhaled, and upon getting his breathing in order, posed his question.

"Tonight, would you be interested in becoming one, together, as a couple?"

"Yes! Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!"

His tension had caused his wording to come out affected and overly formal.

Hearing it, Hina nodded so fast that her head bobbed up and down, and a smile spread across her face like a flower opening its petals.



The bed creaked.

Hina had lain down in front of Kaito, her cheeks tinged scarlet.

As he sat beside her silver hair, he gently placed his hands on the bed. It creaked again. While all she was likely doing was automatically mimicking human breathing, Hina's large breasts heaved up and down beneath her thin negligee as though to demonstrate how tense and excited she was.

Kaito swallowed. But then he quickly lifted his arms and adjusted his posture.

Still horizontal, Hina blinked repeatedly.

"Master Kaito, if I may, why are you sitting with your legs folded underneath you?"

"Oh, it's just that my old man and his mistresses would always just go at it like dogs in heat. I figured it'd be better to say something before we get started, so I wanted to sit more formally in *seiza*."

"Say-za? How interesting! I'll do that, too!"

Hina bounced to her feet, then knelt the same way Kaito was.

The two of them were sitting facing each other. Both of their expressions were meek, but then, at the same time, they both burst into laughter.

After the two of them finished giggling together, Kaito placed his hands flat on the bed in front of him and gave Hina a deep bow. She followed his lead.

"Then, with that, please take good care of me. Thank you? No, that sounds kinda weird. Here I come? No, no, no, wait, that one doesn't count! Uh... I promise to take good care of you!"

"Please, come at me all you wish! Until the day my steel heart stops beating, I, too, wish to spend my life with you, to protect you, and to eventually break by your side. But until then, I hope we spend many long years together."

The two of them lifted their heads at the same time. As evidenced by the continued reddening of their cheeks, both of them felt somewhat embarrassed.

Then Hina averted her gaze for just a moment. Kaito tilted his head to the side, wondering what was wrong this time.

Rather hesitatingly, she posed a question to him.

"The thing is... I'd thought it best to ask you beforehand, but please, you must promise to try not to take offense."

"Hey, what's the matter?"

"Would it be preferable if I were to act bashfully? Or would it be acceptable for me to act somewhat vulgarly?"

"Khak!"

Kaito found himself having another coughing fit. He heaved as air forced its way out of his lungs.

Hina reached an arm out to him in concern. With one hand, she gently stroked his back.

Thanks to that, he managed to settle down. Upon sensing that fact, Hina slid her pale hand up to the nape of Kaito's neck. Her slender fingers tickled, sending a shiver down Kaito's spine.

"Hi...na..."

"Master Kaito."

Then she shifted her weight backward and fell once more horizontally atop the bed.

Spontaneously, Kaito ended up falling on top of her.

Bashful as she was, a seductive smile spread across Hina's face. Her abundant breasts were pressing softly against the bottom part of Kaito's body. The sensation was warm, and they felt as though they'd melt between his fingers if he grasped them.

*Whoa.*

Kaito suddenly felt a violent spell of dizziness come on.

Bringing her face close to his ears, Hina exhaled and gave a sweet whisper.

"Please, Master Kaito, kiss me."

"S-sure."

As she'd requested, he laid his lips atop hers. Hina timidly surrendered her tongue. As their lips gingerly became acquainted with each other, Kaito clumsily followed her lead. Immediately, Hina's tongue movements became much more confident.

Lascivious sounds filled the air, and the moment seemed to last an eternity.

Eventually, Kaito withdrew his lips from hers. After taking a breath, he whispered.

"I...I feel all dizzy, and giddy, and it's hard to breathe, and it feels like my head's gonna explode."

"Hee-hee, how adorable."

"If anything, you're the cute one. By the way, Hina. You don't have to worry about stuff like making sure you do it right, or about adapting to my tastes. I doubt I'm gonna be doing much of a great job, after all. As long as you do what feels natural, then I'm happy... Hey. What's that grin for?"

Hina was giving a slight chuckle. On reflex, Kaito replied with a petulant frown.

Hina stuck out a finger and poked Kaito affectionately on the nose.

"I can't help it. It makes me so happy to see how kind you are, even in the bedroom."

"I...I see."

"There is one thing, though."

"What?"

To that, Hina replied by raising her face and nuzzled Kaito's nose with hers like a puppy. Then, like a small bird, she planted light kisses all over his face. Finally, she turned toward him once more.

The smile she showed him was warm and blissful, and the voice she whispered to him in oozed like sweet honey.

"I'm so very happy that doing 'what feels natural' is bound to be rather immodest."

Kaito's face flushed scarlet. He tried to say something, but Hina stole his lips away with hers. After sharing a long kiss, they drew their faces apart. Their eyes met, and they smiled at each other.

"Master Kaito, I love you so much."

"I love you, too, Hina."

Then, as if they couldn't help themselves, they pressed their lips together again and again.

The bed quaked.

And then came the sound of rustling clothes.





# 4

## The Golden Torture Princess

F r e a m d T o r t u r e c h a n



## 4

### The Golden Torture Princess

“.....Oy. Butcher.”

“What do you require, Madam Elisabeth? Your voice sounds ever so threatening.”

“I know not why, but I feel a pressing urge to give a toast, strike a wall, and kick a certain someone from a certain somewhere so hard that they fall on their behind. ’Tis a warm feeling that strikes me, yet a brutal one.”

“Ah, what a coincidence. For some reason, I feel much the same way.”

The response the Butcher gave Elisabeth was slovenly.

As always, the two of them were in the Torture Princess’s bedroom. The forcibly built bonfire had long since burned out and turned to ash. In its place, the room was strewn with bones, plates, and empty bottles of wine.

It was the remnants of a feast, to be sure. The room’s condition was honestly quite dreadful.

And in the middle of that disastrous scene, Elisabeth was lying atop the bed, and the Butcher was on the floor. Both of them were sprawled out and staring vacantly at the ceiling.

Abruptly, though, Elisabeth came to a sudden realization and spoke with a serious expression.

“Hold it. Could this strange feeling perhaps have been brought about by the fact that we’ve been gorging ourselves on peculiar meats?”

“Hmm, I get the distinct impression that false accusations are falling upon me out of the blue.”

“And on that note, why were all the goods you came stocked with so ridiculous?”

“How dare you! The rare slime-steak was surprisingly edible, wasn’t it?!”

Unable to move due to his overeating, the Butcher flapped his arms back and forth in protest. Elisabeth sullenly refused to answer, and the room returned to silence. All of a sudden, though, she sprang into motion.

With a “Heave, ho!” Elisabeth gathered strength in her abdominal muscles and sat upright. Once she had, she whipped her neck back and forth.

“Earlier, I realized this is no time to be relieved, and no time to be sleeping. That said, the fact remains that a human cannot just merrily waltz into beastfolk lands.”

Elisabeth crossed her arms, deep in thought. While she had resolve aplenty, the situation still hadn’t changed.

Unless they were invited by one of the beastfolk, it would violate the treaty for a human to enter the pureblood sector. And ever since news had spread about the Church's plans to burn her at the stake, the Torture Princess's misdeeds had become well known over an even greater area.

It would be no laughing matter if she ended up being the catalyst for war.

Knowing all that full well, Elisabeth frowned. As he rubbed his round belly, the Butcher offered his two cents.

"If that's the case, then might I suggest taking this time to deal with any matters you've been putting off? I daresay your demon hunt kept you rather busy, after all."

"Nonsense. I've no matters I've been—"

Then Elisabeth's eyes gently widened, and she casually unwound her crossed arms.

Clearly having thought of something, Elisabeth gnawed on her lips. Then, upon closing her eyes, she gave herself to her thoughts. Eventually, she opened her eyes back up. When she did, she leaped off the bed with great vigor.

"It seems you have a point. I do, in fact, have something I've been putting off. I'm leaving."

"Okaaaay, have fuuuuun!"

Completely carefree, the Butcher gently waved her good-bye. The Torture Princess's silken black hair fluttered as she strode past the lounging man. When she opened the door, she did so with great force.

Moving only his neck, the Butcher saw her off.

Having left the door open, she soon receded down the hallway. Eventually, the Butcher let out a soft murmur.

"Even in your short lives, people have a surprisingly great many things they must do, Madam Elisabeth, and many things they find themselves regretting if they fail to do so. One never knows how long this world will be around, after all."

With the Butcher alone in the bedroom, silence quickly descended.

But before long, he let out a loud belch.



The following morning marked a blissful, tranquil, languid, sweet beginning.

However, it was also hurried, and somewhat embarrassing.

Kaito and Hina woke at the same time, as happy as could be.

With nothing but the blankets covering their naked bodies, they turned to look at each other.

Kaito was at a bit of a loss for what best to say. His heart was full to the brim, and he doubted his ability to hold a normal conversation. Hina seemed to be in the same predicament.

It was unclear who was supposed to go first, but after wavering for a moment, the two of them decided to exchange their usual greetings.

"Morning, Hina."

"A lovely morning to you, Master Kaito."

A perfectly charming smile spread across Hina's face. Not realizing he was doing so, Kaito replied in kind with his own.

With that, the two of them gently pressed their foreheads together, causing their bangs to brush against the other's skin. It was ticklish, and the two of them laughed like children. Right when they were about to exchange kisses, though, they were brusquely interrupted.

Without warning, the door burst open.

"Ah, what a splendid day it is! I bid you good morning, Sir Kaito!"

Lute had made his appearance.

His face bore a wide smile.

Kaito and Hina froze.

Kaito timidly turned toward the door. Lute was standing in the doorway, his eyes snapping open and shut. With his gaze, Kaito silently begged Lute to read the room. As though to say he understood, Lute gave a meek nod.

—*Creeeeak, click.*

The door closed once more.

Kaito and Hina sprang into action.

Beastfolk weren't much for baths, and when they did take them, noble beastfolk would generally use large, public baths filled with flowers and fragrant herbs. However, the guest room Kaito and Hina were staying in had a small, tiled bathroom adjoining it, likely out of consideration for visitors of other races. Normally, they'd have to ask a lady-in-waiting to bring them hot water, but as they were in a hurry, Kaito elected to magically generate and heat the water himself.

After quickly washing off their bodies, the two of them returned to the room and hurriedly got dressed.

Then, once they'd finished, Kaito loudly cleared his throat.

"We're, uh, we're decent."

"Ah, what a splendid day it is! I bid you good morning, Sir Kaito!"

"Pretending it didn't happen isn't gonna make it any better!"

Kaito's voice was unintentionally strong, and Lute's ears drooped.

"My apologies. We beastfolk rise earlier than the sun, so I just... In any case, it was wholly inconsiderate of me. I'm rather thoughtless, as you can see, but that excuses nothing, no."

"No, no, it's fine. Honestly, it's our fault as much as anything. Sorry."

Each of them spent a moment trying to insist he was to blame, and after a bit, Lute's ears perked back up. Starting over from the beginning, he handed a folded maid uniform to Hina.

"I believe this is yours, Madam Hina. The court lady asked me to bring it to you."

"Oh, why, thank you so much! Excuse me for a moment while I get changed!"

As she did, Kaito and Lute stepped out into the hallway. There, they began discussing their plans for the day.

The first matter on the agenda was meeting up with Vyade's private forces after breakfast.

"At the meeting, we intend to go over our patrol routes going forward. We would have you attend, if you are amenable."

"Yeah, of course. I'll be there."

"And as far as breakfast goes, there was talk of having you sup alongside Lady Vyade Ula Forstlast. However, I'd thought you might be tired, so I arranged for you to eat separately. Would you rather I hadn't?"

"Oh, geez, thank god! If we'd eaten together, I'd have been so nervous that all the food would've gotten stuck in my throat."

"Ha-ha, I can sympathize! I, too, find formality stifling!"

At that, Lute scratched at the copper fur on his head. His laughter was much friendlier than it had been in the past.

Their breakfast was waiting for them in the council room, so that was where Kaito headed once Hina had finished changing. The three of them proceeded through the castle's grand interior.

The halls of Vyade's castle were crafted from stone. But they, too, were decorated with all manner of live ivy, flowers, and embroidered tapestries. Apparently, each member of the imperial family had their own unique insignia.

All of the beast hides used to cover the windows were rolled up, allowing golden sunlight to stream in at a slant.

*Man, that's pretty... Wait, huh?*

Just then, Kaito realized that the jewel with Vlad's soul in it was rattling around in his pocket.

Kaito reflexively went pale. Now that he thought about it, he'd forgotten to toss his upper garments far off to the side the previous night. And ever since he'd first run mana through the jewel, Vlad had been able to perceive its surroundings.

*Man, he, uh, he's gonna be all up in my business, isn't he...?*

As Kaito squeezed his forehead, he and Hina continued following after Lute.



The breakfast menu consisted of thin, flat bread, a soft cheese spread, and a chicken-vegetable stew. None of them had a particularly strong flavor, but salt and other spices had been prepared for them as well.

Apparently, the palates of the beastfolk who lived near the demi-human border differed from those of the rest of their kind, and their cooking often featured a characteristic set of spices that reminded Kaito of the fried rice

he'd once seen being doled out from a stand. Humans rarely cared for the exotic cuisine, though, so their meal had been prepared more in line with the mainland beastman customs. The dishes favored at the imperial court were rather involved, so those had been avoided as well. As far as Kaito was concerned, that was probably for the best.

After taking his meal atop the council room table, Kaito finished eating.

A lady-in-waiting made her appearance quickly, clearing away the dishes before promptly bringing out some tea.

For a little while, Kaito and the others just waited.

Before long, though, the doors opened again, and a number of unfamiliar soldiers strode in.

Each of them was wearing a vermilion suit of armor made from leather, fangs, and scales. Many of them were carnivorous, but there were horned bucks and aged sheep among them as well. Although none of them said a word, all of them were giving off intimidating auras.

They matter-of-factly assumed their seats, with their various subordinates standing around them. Lute's subordinates, whom Kaito and Hina recognized from the other day, were present as well. The spacious council room quickly grew packed with beastfolk.

Once he'd made sure everyone was present, Lute stood up.

He abruptly began discussing the incident that had taken place the other day.

"At long last, we were able to apprehend the perpetrator behind the massacres. However, as you should all be aware from the documents you received last night, whether or not it possesses a will of its own is debatable. We suspect it was manufactured by someone, which means we have no guarantee that only one exists. Consequently, we need to go back and decide on what routes our patrols—"

"Before that, isn't there something that needs to be said?"

The beastman, resembling a buck, spoke in a velvety voice, but his tone was cold.

His eyes had a chilly, androgynous beauty to them, and he focused them directly on Kaito. His gaze was decidedly alien, and upon finding himself on the receiving end of it, Kaito unconsciously straightened out his posture. Beside the deerman, a large bearman gave a grave nod.

"Indeed. That human there is a contractor to a demon. The enemy of mankind, if I'm not mistaken."

"True, Sir Lute seems to have received orders behind closed doors to come to an agreement with him—an act, I may add, none of us were consulted on."

The mood in the chamber instantly grew restless. Lute's subordinates looked to be on the verge of saying something, but Lute raised a hand and calmly silenced them. Needle-sharp gazes turned toward Kaito, one after another.



In the midst of all that, Kaito was utterly composed. He was the Kaiser's contractor. He'd long since stopped expecting warm welcomes.

The tension in the room grew more and more severe. Then suddenly, a foxman soldier stood up.

"Yes, that's right! In other words, we all have something that need first be done!"

"Aye!"

A number of voices rang out in agreement. One by one, the soldiers stood, each of them brimming with vigor. Hina immediately reached into her leather bag and grabbed the handle of her halberd.

The entire situation rested on a needle's point. The soldiers were the first to break the tension as they grabbed their blades and drew them from their sheaths.

Steel tips pointed toward the sky.

Holding their swords reverently with both hands, the brawny soldiers knelt in unison. Their subordinates followed their lead.

Lute gave a relaxed smile, as though to say he'd seen this coming.

Kaito and Hina blinked rapidly. The deerman's sonorous voice rang out through the room.

"We are a people who prize obligations, strength, and above all else, results. And on top of that, Lady Vyade Ula Forstlast acknowledged you and welcomed you into our lands. Her words are the words of the Forest King. Sir Kaito, all of us would like to extend our thanks to you for your efforts."

"Wh..."

Kaito felt as though he'd been struck by lightning. The way the beastfolk had reacted had been completely outside his expectations.

The moment he'd left Elisabeth's side, he'd braced himself for countless days of hardship. Even with his beloved bride, Hina, by his side, choosing to become the enemy of mankind required a great deal of resolve. Kaito had expected to spend the rest of his life reviled, scorned, and hunted.

He had been prepared for that, and yet now, he was receiving heartfelt thanks.

Then his thoughts turned to Izabella. Back at the plaza in the Capital, he'd been able to confirm she'd made it out okay. Although they weren't on great terms at the moment, she hadn't hesitated to take his hand, the hand of a contractor, back when he'd offered it to her.

*Ever since I made my contract with the Kaiser, it's just been one surprise after another.*

As Kaito pondered his unexpected good fortune, another emotion welled up within him as well.

*And I never thought I'd be able to be of so much help to someone.*

Kaito Sena had once been cast aside like garbage atop a tatami floor. His life had been worth less than a worm's. In fact, his life had had no meaning to it whatsoever. But now, things were different.

Even though he'd become the enemy of mankind, he'd been able to help someone, and he'd been able to forge a path for himself without going against any of his beliefs. It was the first thing he could feel truly proud of since he'd come to this world.

Kaito returned the soldiers' gazes proudly. A grizzly-bearman spoke.

"From here on out, we ask that you continue lending us your aid."

"Yeah, of course. I'm not gonna let this killer off the hook. Please, let me do whatever I can to help."

Kaito responded, and the beastfolk nodded. They then stood up in perfect unison and resheathed their swords. Kaito turned to Lute, who gave him a strong nod.

It was unclear who went first, but the two of them extended their hands toward each other.

The beast and human hands overlapped as the demon's contractor and beastman swore to fight as one.

Then Lute collapsed.

Blood spurted up into the air, and the Kaiser laughed.

"...Huh?"

Kaito's eyes went wide. He hadn't done anything. What was going on? Even with his abilities as a demon's contractor, he found himself wholly unable to comprehend the situation.

To make matters worse, the tragedy didn't end there. Blood sprayed across the round table like flower petals dancing in the air. One after another, the strong soldiers toppled to the ground, unable to so much as react.

"M-Master Kaito!"

This time, Hina pulled her halberd out in earnest. Then she assumed a position in front of Kaito.

As she did, Kaito caught a faint glance of steel flashing toward the edge of his vision.

Their enemy wasn't in front of them.

Shocked as he was, an instinctual hunch drove him to turn around.

One thought passed through Kaito's mind.

—A flower had just arrived.



Before Kaito stood a young girl, alone.

Not hesitating in the slightest, she strode brazenly in through the open door.

The room's calm, disciplined atmosphere had been shattered, and it had now descended into chaos.

Seeing the girl's figure standing among it, Kaito found himself taken aback.

After all, her appearance was hardly befitting the culprit who'd brought about this mayhem.

She looked to be in her early teens, but her attire hardly fit her age, given how provocative it was. It was probably intended as a pure-white bondage dress, but its cloth barely covered any skin at all. The leather belts she wore strapped in a cross shape across her pale, naked chest only barely covered the risqué bits, to the point where it called into question whether or not they could even be called clothes. But she made up for it in accoutrements. In particular, the metal bits adorning her waist and wrists caused her to give off a somewhat mechanical impression. At the same time, though, her honey-colored hair and rosy eyes provided her figure with brilliant, showy garnishes.

She looked like a flower, or a queen, or some kind of adorable doll.

And by her feet, she was accompanied by a number of metal monsters.

One of them was a beast made of nothing but fangs. Another was an automaton, shaped like a human except for its fatally warped frame.

One of the other monsters was a lizard with limbs made from pipes and wings of glass. And the final one was a bipedal suit of armor with no visible seams anywhere on its body.

They were the ones responsible for slicing up and striking down the beastfolk. Each one looked different from the last, yet when taken together, they had a strange sense of uniformity to them.

Instinctively, Kaito let out a pained murmur.

*"...Deus Ex Machina."*

These things were of the same class as that machine.

And there could be no doubt that the golden girl was their master.

The way she carried herself made it seem almost like she was their queen. That, or perhaps their ringmaster or puppeteer. Speaking of puppets, though, the girl looked practically like a doll herself.

She presented a showy and sweet exterior. Her expression, though, was as cold and frigid as ice.

In a way, she seemed to lack humanity.

Suddenly, her crystal-like, rose eyes flashed to the side.

At long last, Kaito recalled the tragedy that had just occurred. Blood had sprayed all around the room, and the sound of moaning was echoed harshly.

Hearing the moans, Kaito felt a vague sense of relief.

*They're still alive.*

He couldn't let any more attacks befall them. With that thought in mind, tension raced across Kaito's whole body. But the girl didn't spare so much as another glance at the suffering beastfolk.

After looking at Hina for a brief moment, she turned her gaze on Kaito.

When she finally opened her mouth to speak, her movements were so stiff that she herself seemed like an automaton.

"O Sinless Soul, who bears the name of Kaiser. From this day forth, act as my loyal servant."

Kaito felt as though someone had struck him in the side of the head. The girl's words were practically the same as *hers*.

At the same time, he finally realized something.

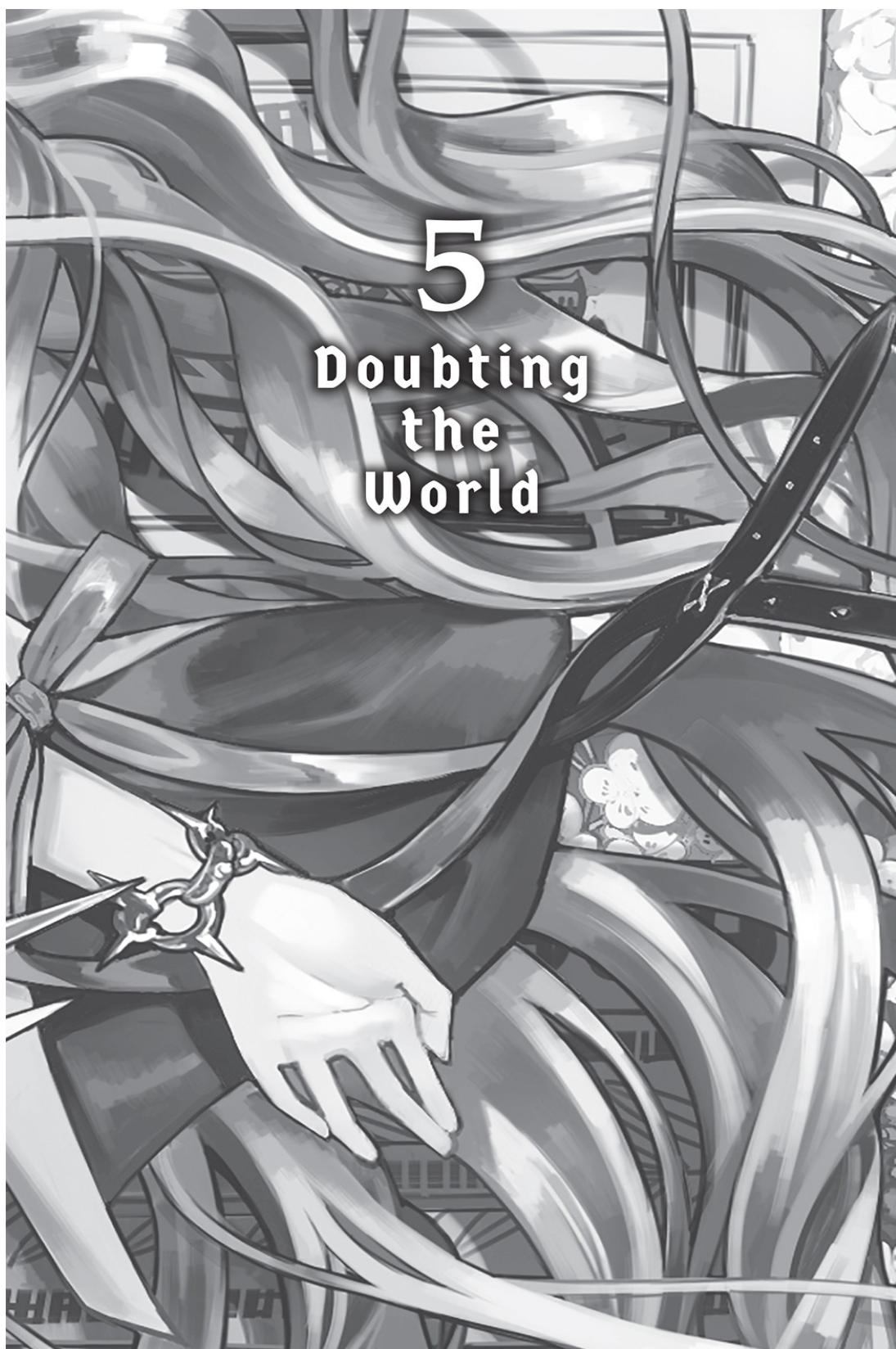
The girl resembled the Torture Princess.

The unique, unparalleled sinner.

Then, after making it seem as though everything leading up to that moment had been a mere farce, after having made all their efforts for naught, after throwing everything into chaos in an instant,

the girl gave her name.

"I am the Torture Princess Jeanne de Rais. I am the oppressor of slaves, the savior of this world, the saint, and the whore."



# 5

## Doubting the World

F r e a m d T o r k u r c h a n





## 5 **Doubting the World**

The entire region was surrounded by a towering wall.

Not a single soul dwelled within.

After a banquet of torture that had lasted three days and three nights, they'd all died.

A decade or two before that fate had befallen the town, its lord's sole daughter had been born.

Her name had been Elisabeth. She was a beautiful, lovely girl, born to the blessings of God and man alike. But tragically, her body had been frail, and the hope of a long life was denied to her at birth.

Even so, not once did she ever begrudge or resent others for living their lives to the fullest.

She merely endured her constant pain, all by herself.

After living a life of suffering and scrabbling to stay alive, she should have died, and the many who held her dear were supposed to have wept for her.

However, that simple, tragic destiny of hers was perverted. One day, Elisabeth underwent a change.

She tortured her populace, descending on the castle town like a ravenous wolf. Maiming and slaughtering her people, Elisabeth swallowed up their pain like a hideous sow.

Thus, the town—serving as a plate for the gruesome feast—was picked clean.

The Church feared that the massive number of corpses would bring about a plague, with small animals as its carriers. Ultimately, they decided to seal the gates and set the town ablaze. Ever since, the town and the huge wall surrounding it had served as a graveyard.

A town had died, and the Torture Princess had been born.

It was like a cruel, twisted fairy tale.

And yet at the same time, it was the bitter truth.

As proof of that, Elisabeth was currently visiting that place.

"I brought this about, and I've long since grown accustomed to such sights. Still, though, 'tis dreadful."

The scene spread out before her was a hellscape, the likes of which were generally seen only in religious artwork.

The town was black and charred, with a number of torture devices strewn about it. Human skeletons decorated the town as well, most of them



impaled, strung up, or bound. Ash and mud were piled up high along its roads.

Setting her feet upon them, Elisabeth strode forward.

At the end of her path lay a chalky-white castle towering above the town. It was almost eerie how its splendor had been preserved amid the ruins.

The sky was gloomy and overcast, and the air should have been chilly. However, it carried an unpleasant warmth instead.

The rancid wind brushed at Elisabeth's black hair as it carried screams to her ears.

Loathsome Elisabeth, repulsive Elisabeth, cruel, hideous Elisabeth!

A curse upon you, a curse upon you, a curse, a curse, an eternal curse upon you, Elisabeth!

The silent screams echoed throughout the town, but Elisabeth's expression showed no signs of changing as she advanced forward. As she walked, she passed by the skeleton of a baby who'd had all its limbs shattered and a woman's skull that had comically tumbled to the side.

Eventually, her heels clicked as she came to a stop.

"Here it is, I believe."

In front of her was the main thoroughfare leading up to the castle.

Compared with the rest of the ruins, it had more or less retained its original form. The road was designed to be wide enough for carriage traffic and had been crafted out of carefully laid bricks. Half-melted metal billboards decorated its sides, along with the still-intact frames of houses and shops. But due to the fight between Elisabeth and a certain necromancer, the entire area had been reduced to the remains of a battlefield.

Bones were scattered all over the ground, and many of the buildings had been brutally knocked down.

The brick road was stripped bare as well, and gruesome scars littered the earth. In the midst of all that, there was an area where the soil was piled unnaturally high. A wooden plank stood up from within the mound of dirt.

It was a grave.

On top of the plank sat a soiled hat. Elisabeth was surprised; she'd half expected it to have been blown away by the wind already. The white lilies that had once decorated its wide brim were, of course, no more.

Faintly narrowing her eyes, Elisabeth murmured.

"...Marianne."

That name was dear to Elisabeth, but disagreeable as well.

Marianne had been Elisabeth's tutor when she was young. Due to her guilt over Elisabeth's murderous deeds, Marianne had gone mad, eventually falling into Vlad's hands and becoming a necromancer.

The grave had not been Elisabeth's doing.

That had been the handiwork of the man who'd finished Marianne off after she'd become a demon's pawn: Kaito Sena.

After burying his father—or rather, the doll that his father’s soul had inhabited—in the rear garden, Kaito had mentioned he wanted to give Marianne a burial as well. At first, Elisabeth had flatly rejected the notion. But Kaito had been obstinate, and Elisabeth had finally acquiesced to giving him transportation, and nothing more.

Bringing back Marianne’s body would have been in defiance of both her wishes and Elisabeth’s, so Kaito built the grave on-site. However, the entire town was fraught with death. Countless corpses littered its streets, not a single one of which had received anything resembling a funeral. Choosing to bury just one of them was a comical act of self-satisfaction.

Elisabeth had shown no mercy in pointing that fact out to Kaito. However, he nodded, already well aware of that fact.

*“I’m the one who killed her. This is my problem, not anyone else’s,” he’d said.*

In a sense, the grave served as a monument to Kaito’s stubbornness as much as anything else.

Up until then, Elisabeth had never once felt the urge to visit it.

She didn’t make it a habit to think back on the people she’d killed. Nor did she pay heed to the entrails she walked over, nor the blood staining the ground in her wake. But now that all fourteen demons had been vanquished, things were different.

Now, she had something she felt she needed to say to the woman beneath the grave.

*“Forgive me, Marianne, for I have lied.”*

Her words, and the apology they carried, came from the heart. Clenching her fists, Elisabeth turned to look behind her. Her gaze was silent as she cast it over the ash-ridden town of death.

*“Forgive me, you all. I said I intended to follow you all shortly. But it seems I cannot go yet. Please, wait for me.”*

No voices rose up to reply. The wind simply carried the same resentment as always.

*Loathsome Elisabeth, repulsive Elisabeth, cruel, hideous Elisabeth!*

*A curse upon you, a curse upon you, a curse, a curse, an eternal curse upon you, Elisabeth!*

Elisabeth responded with a gentle smile.

Then she repeated the same words she’d once said, words that now amounted to little more than a soliloquy.

*“I had no right to take the light of a single person in this world. Every person I killed led a vigorous life, a life they had every right to carry out as they pleased. They were innocent, and I murdered them. I killed you all cruelly, gruesomely, mercilessly, and unreasonably. And I’ve no intention of escaping on my own. I need put down but one more...or stop him, and that shall be the end.”*

Her final words, and her final words alone, had a certain frailty to them.

Turning her head up toward the ashen sky, Elisabeth closed her eyes. Beneath her eyelids, the scene leading up to Marianne's death played back. Clad in her mourning dress, her tutor hadn't directed a shred of hatred her way.

Her eyes had been full of kindness, like those of an adult talking to a willful child.

*"I loved you from the bottom of my heart, young miss. Even now, I adore you just as much as I did when you were a child."*

Then, with a deep, harsh sadness in her voice, she'd laid out the truth.

*"Once you've killed me, I imagine there will be nobody left in this world who truly loves you."*

"Yes, I had no one. I was...supposed to have no one..."

*"I like her a whole lot."*

*"For that person's sake, I could do or become anything."*

"To say such a thing of a woman who partook of a demon's flesh and became the Torture Princess... What a complete and utter fool."

As she shook her head in exasperation, Elisabeth went quiet. Then she turned back toward the grave. She was on the verge of saying something, but then suddenly, her face froze.

She'd suddenly been assailed by a deep sense of discomfort.

It felt like a needle, piercing its way into her brain.

"Wait. Just a moment. Just now, that..."

Feeling a shock run through her head, Elisabeth pressed down on her forehead.

She looked back over the scene before her. There was nothing strange about it, nothing out of place. There was nothing in particular about Marianne's grave that could have set off such a reaction. Yet for some reason, the discomfort refused to fade.

*What, then? What could it have been that I found so unsettling?*

As she racked her brain, she found herself thinking back on a certain memory. She'd been very young, and she'd thrown her quill pen on the ground. She'd been sulking at a lesson that hadn't made sense to her, but Marianne scolded her, kindly yet firmly.

*"If you think about it carefully, young miss, it will all make sense," she'd murmured.*

*Then she'd smiled. "Let's go over it one more time, now, shall we?"*

*"Go over my last words...one more time."*

To say such a thing of a woman who partook of a demon's flesh and became the Torture Princess.

Elisabeth opened her eyes wide in shock. Now that she thought about it, it was obvious beyond belief. But back when she'd been hunting the fourteen demons, she hadn't had a spare moment to think about such things.

But now, she'd realized.

*Therein lay a fundamental contradiction.*

"I partook of a demon's flesh."

In and of itself, there was nothing strange about that fact. After all, Vlad and his compatriots had already summoned demons at that point. But just like her, Vlad Le Fanu was no mere human. He'd been the first of the fourteen to summon a demon, successfully forming a contract with the Kaiser, the strongest demon mankind could call forth.

Kaito had received Vlad's help as an intermediary, but doing something like that alone was a feat no ordinary mage could pull off.

Compared with the Torture Princess, who'd butchered the entire populace of her fiefdom, Vlad's power was surely inferior. But he himself must have eaten a demon's flesh before making Elisabeth do the same and trying to mold her into his successor.

*By eating a demon's flesh, Vlad Le Fanu gained the power to summon a demon.*

"Wait."

It was contradictory.

It was wildly, overwhelmingly contradictory.

"Where did the *first demon's flesh* come from?"



"As you haven't replied yet, I will ask you again. From now on, serve me."

"Hard pass."

Jeanne, the new girl who'd introduced herself as a Torture Princess, gave Kaito a forceful invitation, and his response was swift.

The situation had taken an abrupt turn.

The calmness of the room had been shattered, along with all their plans. The beastfolk who'd promised to fight with Kaito as allies were all collapsed on the floor. And for some reason, the perpetrator, a girl he'd never seen before, was ordering him to become her servant.

Confused as he was, his response was as sure as it had been the last time something similar had happened.

An image of the brutally slaughtered, strung-up corpses flashed through his mind. And the people who'd been kind enough to believe in him were currently lying on the ground and bleeding out. Given those two facts, refusing was the only sensible option.

He was concerned her mood would sour, but for some reason, Jeanne nodded instead. But unlike Elisabeth, who'd reacted with amusement, Jeanne merely spoke unconcernedly in her barely human voice.

"Your response was rather quick, mister. While your response itself fell within expected parameters, its speed was quite unexpected. What a strange sensation—disappointing, and yet, at the same time, not. All is well, though. I have my conjectures, but would you mind elaborating on your reasoning?"

"First of all, I already serve the Torture Princess Elisabeth Le Fanu. Second, given that you committed all those murders, and you did *this*, you're undoubtedly my enemy."

"I suspect there is a third."

Jeanne prompted him to continue. After taking a deep breath, Kaito spat out his answer with all the antagonism he could muster.

"My third reason's that you make me straight-up sick."

"I see. How illogical."

Jeanne gave a light nod. Then she blinked a few times, her rose-colored eyes flashing as she did. Finally, she contorted her lips into what was likely meant to be a smile.

"As for your first reason, mister, I believe you've already parted ways with the Torture Princess, have you not?"

"Yeah, true. But even so, I can't serve anyone else. She's the one who called me, and she's the one I serve. I swore to stay by her side till the end, so even if we're separated, she's still my master."

"I see, a decision based exclusively on psychological principles. It's no wonder I find it impossible to comprehend. After all, I've long since been deemed 'heartless.' As for the rest of your reasons, it would take too long for me to explain in my own words, so forgive me for borrowing the parlance of you lost sheep, but—**they're fuckin' horseshit.**"

Kaito unconsciously stared at her, befuddled.

Her features and expression were like those of a delicately crafted doll, just like always. Kaito found it hard to believe he'd heard the words he just had come out of her rigid-looking lips. But she went on much in the same way.

**"Man, quit lining up one pointless-ass reason after the other, ya little shit. Why don'cha take a look around you and think about how outclassed you are before you go running your damn mouth. You should either crawl back into your cradle and start over, or go dig yourself a grave and lie in it. As I said, pardon me."**

"Wh...what's her deal, exactly?"

*"I'd guess the people she used as reference for her 'parlance of the commons' had rather foul mouths. While it's a nonsensical method of finding common ground, it's hardly unheard of among preeminent mages."*

A clear, deep voice resounded. Normally, only Kaito could hear it, but at the moment, it was emanating from beside him. Just like he did when he talked to Vlad or Elisabeth, the Kaiser was currently projecting his voice such that he could be heard by all present.

Disconcerted, Kaito looked to his side. At some point, black strands had started knitting themselves together in empty space. Sleek and obsidian, they began as supple muscles in the air. Then fine black fur sprouted atop them. Choosing this time to assume a form twice the size of an ordinary dog, the supreme hound finished materializing.

As he shook his whole body, he let out a humanlike laugh.

*"Vlad and Elisabeth were fond of idle banter, you see. Those two should be taken as exceptions, not as any sort of standard."*

"Kaiser? You came out on your own? What, are things really that serious?"

*"Ha. At this rate, you're liable to carelessly get yourself killed. Take care, unworthy master of mine. You'll find out quick enough if you inspect her mana and compare it to yours, but that girl is far, far superior."*

"Oh, **a doggy?**"

Jeanne tilted her head to the side, her choice of words almost eerily childish. She was silent for a few seconds, like a machine that had been shut off. After a moment, though, she clapped her fist against her palm.

"I've parsed the applicable data. I see, you're the Kaiser! **Y'know, this is all you guys' fault, you puke-smellin' pig humpers**, or so I'd like to reprimand you, but for now, I bid you a fine hello. You look just like the books said you would."

*"Heh, your courtesy is lacking, but at least you're polite enough to manage a half-decent greeting. The surprise is all mine—I'd hardly expected to see a Deus Ex Machina user in this day and age."*

"Oh my, mister. It's **a bit of a buzzkill** that even you didn't expect it."

The girl and the hound engaged in a conversation, one that seemed frankly amiable. As they did, Kaito trembled.

He'd done as the Kaiser suggested and checked Jeanne's mana supply.

*This...this is some sick joke, right?*

He hadn't noticed it due to the chaos and confusion, but the amount of mana the girl had in stock was leagues beyond your average person. She was practically a match for Elisabeth. And unlike the roselike, sinister sharpness to Elisabeth's mana, Jeanne's was sumptuous and cold.

She gave off the twisted impression of an artificial flower, one that ate people alive.

Kaito knew instantly that he was no match for her.

*But I gotta do something about her, or I can't save Lute and the others.*

He could still hear them groaning. As far as he could tell, none of their wounds were fatal, but that might change if they didn't get help soon. Beginning to lose his cool, Kaito asked the Kaiser a question while looking for an opening.

"Hey, Kaiser, what's Deus Ex Machina?"

*"Hmm? It's an entity, one that requires a particular summoning rite to call forth."*

"A summoning rite?"

Upon hearing the unexpected phrase, Kaito narrowed his eyes. When he heard "summoning rite," his mind immediately jumped to the birdlike creatures La Mules had summoned. But those things hadn't looked anything like Deus Ex Machina.

Paying Kaito's confusion little heed, the Kaiser nodded in assent.

*“Elisabeth can summon torture devices without limit, can she not? What she does is use her own mana as a catalyst to drag formless, nameless, worthless masses of mana down from higher dimensions and temporarily mold them into the forms that best suit her purposes. Summoning beasts is similar. But whether one can do that or not, whether one is able to take formless things and mold them into shapes suited for battle, depends heavily on one’s nature. ‘Deus Ex Machina’ refers to the entity summoned when one uses a particular summoning rite that a mad sorcerer developed to subvert that restriction.”*

The Kaiser swung his sleek black tail toward the horrible machines.

It was true; when you looked at them all lined up, they were clearly designed with only combat in mind.

*“Deus Ex Machina is a weapon, designed so one can use it regardless of their nature or disposition. In order to continually materialize it, though, requires colossal amounts of mana. Using it at all is liable to kill the user. That lout Vlad was thinking of summoning it, but upon looking at its particulars, he deemed it a ‘hassle to maintain’ and abandoned the notion. However, it seems that lass there has mastered it, and with a mere human body.”*

“It seems I’m being complimented, but we still haven’t shown you our true power. It’s true that the one you sealed in ice was part of Deus Ex Machina, mister, but it was nothing more than a foot soldier I made from the spare parts that these children gathered up for me. It certainly wasn’t one of the main units.”

Upon hearing what she had to say, Kaito shuddered. If that was the case, then just how strong were the main units anyways? After all, those were the ones Jeanne was casually surrounded by.

The Kaiser pointed his long tail at her. Then, as he murmured, he laughed at the girl who’d introduced herself as a new Torture Princess.

*“Surely, I can think of no explanation besides her having eaten a demon’s flesh.”*

“Wait, what?”

The Kaiser had suddenly dropped a new piece of information on him, one that was wholly unthinkable.

Kaito was aghast. Did that mean the girl in front of him was just like Elisabeth, a person truly worthy of the title of Torture Princess? There was no way that could be possible.

At the same time, he felt a degree of satisfaction at having resolved the contradiction between his conjectures and the Kaiser’s proclamation.

Just like the torture devices Elisabeth summoned, Deus Ex Machina itself was wholly unrelated to demons. That said, though, its master had obtained her power by consuming a demon’s flesh.

*So in other words, the massacres had both nothing to do with demons and everything to...do...?*

It was at that moment that Kaito arrived at a new, horrifying question.



Supposedly, Jeanne had eaten a demon's flesh. It was unclear when that had happened, but it didn't appear as though any of the fourteen contractors had known of her existence.

Hypothetically speaking, if one of them had reached out to her and offered her the meat in order to form a collaborative relationship with her, they would surely have called upon her aid before being killed by Kaito and the others.

*But if that's the case, then which demon's flesh did she eat?*

Once more, Kaito trembled.

"On that note, shall we take our leave, mister?"

Jeanne's voice was as light as a small bird chirping.

*The hell do you mean, "on that note"?!*

But Kaito had no time to be baffled. The girl extended her hand to him, as though inviting him to dance. The chains dangling from her wrists made her look almost like a prisoner.

Unclear as to what she meant, Kaito tilted his head to the side. Holding her halberd in one hand, Hina took a step forward.

"I believe Master Kaito already declined your nonsense."

**"Oh my, oh my, oh my. Y'all still don't get it, do ya, dumb-asses."**

Jeanne spoke, her expression blank. Her chains rattled as she propped her index finger up on her lip.

Then she went on, as though trying to explain something obvious to a child.

"Allow me to put it the way you would, mister. First of all, the lives of all the beastfolk here rest in my hands... Oh, how unfortunate. I suppose the 'first' point was all I had."

It seemed like she truly found that fact unfortunate, as she cast her rosy eyes down. However, she soon got over it. She pointed one slender finger toward Lute.

Kaito looked at him. As he kept pressure on his wounded flank, Lute met Kaito's gaze and shook his head. He was silently screaming at Kaito not to go with her.

He hadn't even tried to ask Kaito for help. He seemed to be planning to oppose her on his own.

Next, Kaito cast his gaze around the council room. Again and again, he received the same response.

All the beastfolk had responded the same way.

That was enough for him.

"Hina, put down your halberd... So where are you planning on taking us?"

Kaito placed a hand on Hina's shoulder. With a small nod, she lowered the tip of her weapon.

As Kaito stepped forward to cover Hina, Jeanne responded matter-of-factly to his question.

"As things stand, not a single one of you stray sheep truly understands the situation we are in. But the world is in a state of crisis, and the situation grows more dire with every passing second. I intend to prove it to you with the most direct methods at my disposal. My reason for that is that fully explaining would take longer. You're the Kaiser's contractor, mister. And you're a valuable piece of bait for the Torture Princess, too. I will make you understand, whether you wish to or not. Now then, **get your ass over here already.**"

Silently, Kaito came to a realization. He and Jeanne were never going to be able to see eye to eye.

*I can't even begin to understand what she's going on about.*

The girl herself, however, seemed to think her duty to explain the situation wholly fulfilled. Still expressionless but with an oddly satisfied demeanor, Jeanne extended her hand to him a second time.

Accompanied by Hina, he took a step forward. When he did, though, someone grabbed his leg. With a start, he looked down.

The expression on Lute's face was desperate as he tried to stop Kaito.

"Sir...Kaito... You...mustn't go... That...girl...is mad..."

"I'm sorry. I dunno what's going on at all, but it looks like I got you guys wrapped up in something terrible. If we leave with Jeanne, at least no civilians will get hurt. Once we're gone, shout for healers."

"But...what about...you—?"

"I'm really sorry about this."

Kaito found himself at a loss for what to say next. Lute's breathing was ragged. After glancing between his golden eyes and the brutal wound carved in his flank, Kaito decided to speak from the heart.

"I was really happy that you guys all believed in me. Thanks...and make sure you take good care of your wife."

With those parting words, Kaito began walking again.

Lute frantically scrabbled at Kaito's ankles, his sharp claws scraping at Kaito's black pant cuffs. But before long, Kaito advanced beyond his reach. As he strode forward, Lute scratched at the ground. But his body refused to move.

No matter how hard Lute struggled, he couldn't follow.

At the same time, he hadn't called for reinforcements. No shortage of powerful soldiers had already fallen. In order to avoid adding to the victim count, Lute chose to just see Kaito's departure through to the end. In spite of that, though, he couldn't keep himself from letting out a weak, rumbling moan from deep within him.

"Uroooooough, uroooooough, uraaaaaagh!"

Kaito took Jeanne's hand. When he did, she squeezed his hand tight. The gesture seemed almost innocent, and she gave a mechanical nod.

At some point, the Kaiser had taken his place by Kaito's side.

Then the Deus Ex Machinas moved to surround them. With bizarre movements, they began spinning around Kaito, Hina, the Kaiser, and

Jeanne. Golden flower petals and white feathers began fluttering along beside them. The two dazzling hues seared the scene into the vision of all present.

It was a magnificent, elegant spectacle, but at the same time, it had a certain coldness to it.

Jeanne shouted from the eye of the vortex.

"Please, set your hearts at ease! Pleasant misters, rude misters, despicable misters, all of you! There is no need for any of you to mourn or lament!"

Then the Torture Princess Jeanne de Rais,  
the oppressor of slaves, the savior of the world, the saint, and the whore,  
made her sonorous declaration.

"All this is for the sake of salvation!"

The golden-white light vanished.

And when it did, Kaito and Hina left the land of the beastfolk behind.

Lute had been left behind, and his furious, frustrated howls echoed off the walls.



In all honesty, Kaito was prepared for the possibility of death.

The things Jeanne was doing and saying gave him no confidence in her sanity. And not only was he unable to tell what she was thinking, but he couldn't even figure out what her objective was. Based on the fact that she'd referred to him as "a valuable piece of bait for the Torture Princess," he clearly held *some* value in her eyes, but past that, he was in the dark.





Given all that, he wouldn't have been shocked to discover that their destination lay a mile up in the air or something.

Hina and the Kaiser were quick on their feet, so he wasn't particularly worried about either of them. But he had little confidence that he himself would be able to make it out of such a situation in one piece.

*I've gotta be ready for whatever comes my way.*

With all that in mind, Kaito put up his guard. The golden petals and white light had melted together before his eyes and formed a firm cylinder, but before long, it shattered and collapsed like molten gold.

It turned out that Kaito's fears had been partly unfounded, as their destination was on proper, solid ground.

The spectacle before him, however, was bizarre enough to make up for that fact.

"...Wh—?"

Kaito had found himself standing in a small village wedged in the ravine between two precipitous mountain ranges.

There were lines of tightly packed, slate-colored buildings flanking him on both sides, both of which seemed to practically cling to the narrow ground. Based on their appearance, the buildings looked to have been made exclusively from boulders quarried off the mountainsides. Each one probably weighed a considerable amount, but they'd been expanded so haphazardly that the pressure had caused them to warp. A few of the buildings had even caved in from the weight of their neighbors.

All in all, they gave off a similar impression to cotton balls packed tightly into a snowdrift.

In other words, the village was old, decrepit, and desolate.

The gap between the mountains that the village sat in grew narrower the higher up one went. As a result, simply by standing in the middle of the town, Kaito felt as though something was oppressively looming over him. Furthermore, the whole place was starved of sunlight, and not even the wind could reach its streets. A single brush with illness could have spelled disaster for its entire populace. But while no standards would have deemed it fit for human habitation, the town's most peculiar aspect was unrelated to its layout.

The honor belonged to the fact that human corpses sat crucified along the walls of each of the buildings.

Their bones were countless and filling up the view for as far as the eye could see.

Three descriptors immediately rushed to the forefront of his mind.

*Massacre. Sacrifice.*

*And finally, torture.*

The crucified corpses had iron stakes running from their palms to their shoulders and from their feet to their thighs.

They also looked rather old, as their flesh had long since rotted away. Because of that, the scars on their bones were visible, making it evident that the iron stakes weren't the only form of torture they'd suffered.

The anguish they'd felt leading up to their deaths looked to have been fierce and protracted.

Every single building in the town was decorated with corpses in that state. Kaito didn't feel the need to bother checking inside any structures to confirm his dreadful theory.

*Even if we went looking for survivors, I think the odds we'd find any are slim.*

In all likelihood, every single person in the village was dead. The mountain-cradled settlement was like a single giant coffin.

On that note, a vague thought drifted through his mind.

*It reminds me of Elisabeth's...no, the Torture Princess's hometown.*

"You know of a similar location, don't you, mister? She and I are both Torture Princesses, after all."

Once more, Jeanne displayed her cheery expression as she spread her arms wide. The chains on her wrists rattled as she spun around, and her honey-blond hair glistened as it swayed.

When she did so, the ornamented, exposed nature of her attire caused her to evoke the very image of a dancer.

"As you're well aware, birthing a Torture Princess requires the pain of a suitable number of sacrifices. Elisabeth killed her people and offered them up to herself. I was given offerings, and those were who I killed. **Same difference, ya feel me?**"

Kaito frowned. He had no idea what she meant. But even though he couldn't understand her, he could somehow make out what she was trying to say.

This village was similar to Elisabeth's hometown in many ways. But there was one major difference between the two.

There were no resentful voices here.

Countless people had been tortured and killed here. Yet in spite of that, Kaito couldn't sense any malicious aura emanating from the gray settlement. The air filling the village was still and silent.

*"Elisabeth killed her people and offered them up to herself"... "I was given offerings, and those were who I killed."*

Kaito turned Jeanne's words over in his head. *"Same difference."*

In other words, this village's inhabitants had willingly offered themselves up to the Torture Princess.

*But why?*

*"Call forth Vlad, boy. We're making no progress at this rate."*

The Kaiser growled, and Kaito turned to look at him. When their eyes met, the Kaiser scoffed.



*"Twisted as you are, your form was originally that of a proper glass sphere. Don't be conceited enough to think you can converse with the likes of her. The best way to deal with a lunatic is to send a lunatic of our own."*

"You have a point there. I can't even begin to tell what she's talking about."

Nodding at the Kaiser's suggestion, Kaito fed mana to the stone in his pocket.

Azure petals and black feathers swirled through the air. Their numbers were on the reserved side this time, but Vlad made his ever-extravagant appearance from within them regardless. He crossed his long legs in the air.

His eyes were glittering with childlike curiosity. Without so much as a preface, he launched into his speech.

*"How intriguing, to artificially construct a Torture Princess that way. I don't know who came up with the idea, but I certainly can't deny its creativity. I have to say, though, I find myself more interested in the creator than the creation... Just who was the beautiful madman who devised you?"*

Vlad's head seemed to practically be in the clouds, the question he was posing having just about nothing to do with Kaito's. Still expressionless, Jeanne pointed toward one particularly misshapen building. The bones crucified against its warped walls were clad in gold adornments.

"Mm."

*"Ah, martyring even himself, I see. How thorough. You've been entrusted with the rest, then, I take it. Which brings us to Elisabeth and Kaito Sena. You're trying to make them your servants."*

Upon hearing her infantile response, Vlad stroked his chin in understanding. Jeanne nodded back. Apparently, the two of them had been able to successfully establish communication. That said, Kaito still couldn't make heads or tails of it.

He frantically called out to Vlad.

"Hey, Vlad, hold up a minute. What the hell were you able to get from that? As far as I'm concerned, it was all just more gibberish. What happened here? What's her goal? If you understand what's going on, man, you gotta lay it out for me."

*"First, let me start with a fairy tale."*

"Excuse me?"

It seemed even Vlad planned to talk in riddles. He'd always been odd, but Kaito was concerned that he'd finally broken. Across from him, Vlad took an elegant bow, like an actor giving a performance.

*"Perhaps you've heard it, my dear successor? No, wait, you hail from another world. It would be odd if you had... Confound it. Now all my fun's been spoiled."*

"I don't care *what's* spoiled. Just answer the question already."

*"Long, long ago, a saint carrying God in her body remade the world, then vanished. Today's story takes place just afterward."*

Ignoring Kaito's complaints, Vlad carried on undeterred. His voice proud and velvety, he poetically spun his tale.

*"Now, for some reason, a whole clan of pedigreed alchemists went missing. It's said this set back humanity's magical developments by over a century. Everyone and their mother went searching for them; even I myself spent some time trying to hunt them down. The likeliest location was held to be the stretch of land between the beastfolk's and the demi-humans' lands—the two races share an amiable relationship, so surveillance at the border is lax. People suspected they'd taken up hiding in a blind spot between the two."*

"So what?"

*"That is precisely where we're standing right now."*

Vlad's story had seemed unrelated, but everything suddenly fell into place.

Flustered, Kaito cast a sweeping glance over the village among the mountains. It was true that the village was short on paths or other ways to get in and out. Describing it as *hidden* would be completely apropos. But if Vlad's story was true, then why had the alchemists chosen to shelter in this place?

Waving his hands like a conductor, Vlad gestured at his surroundings as he continued his fairy tale.

*"The alchemists hid themselves away here and spent many years searching for a method to work against a certain objective. In the end, they created a Torture Princess. The clan had bolstered their ranks through inbreeding, and they all gave themselves up as offerings to empower her."*

"Why the hell would they—?"

"...In short, you're saying they needed martial power?"

Hina, who'd been standing beside Kaito on high alert, finally spoke.

Vlad cast his gaze toward her, as though he'd only just registered her existence. He seemed altogether surprised. But then his mouth curled up into a gentle, refined smile.

*"Good thinking. It would seem the rubbish I once tossed together has attained excellence. Your growth far exceeds my expectations; as a mage, I must say I find that rather delightful. Why, you seem downright human."*

"Given that they were willing to go so far as to sacrifice themselves, I conjecture the opponent they were facing was not an enemy of theirs personally. After raising her as the Torture Princess, they entrusted her with fighting against 'something' that, while dreadful, they had no personal connection to. That is my hypothesis, as someone familiar with the power and fate of another Torture Princess, Lady Elisabeth. Would you agree, Master Kaito?"

Splendidly ignoring Vlad's rude remarks, Hina laid out her theory. Kaito glanced over toward Jeanne. He hadn't expected a response out of her, but she actually gave a small nod. In other words, Hina's hypothesis had been on the mark.

As he considered that, he found himself plagued by a violent sense of dizziness.

Every answer he got was raising new questions.

*In order to fight this "thing," whatever it is, they made a Torture Princess? Man, sacrificing themselves must have taken a boatload of resolve and conviction. What in the world were they fighting against? Torturing themselves and feeding demon flesh to her would—no, wait.*

Kaito quickly hit the brakes on his runaway train of thought. Then he gave voice to the question that had just bothered him.

"So which demon's flesh did she eat, exactly?"

"Since you've already died once, mister, you should already have something of an idea even if you don't know the answer, right?"

Jeanne turned to Vlad and prompted him on. He nodded, having understood.

Kaito instinctively fixed a stare on Vlad. Vlad then whispered to him, as though he were sharing some great secret.

*"I suspect the flesh she consumed came from the same demon mine did, you see."*

If he had eaten the same flesh Jeanne had, then that meant...

*It's not the Kaiser's meat... No, wait, that's just totally wrong.*

"That's...right..."

Finally, Kaito realized the contradiction therein. Vlad had been the Kaiser's contractor. In order to accomplish that, he'd somehow procured demon flesh. Kaito had never spared that much thought. But without getting help from someone, he would have needed to eat a demon's flesh in order to be able to summon the Kaiser.

*And anyway, there's no way the proud Kaiser would ever allow anyone to consume his flesh.*

After gathering up enough pain to preserve his own life, Vlad had chosen to take on a mentorship role and had stopped accumulating strength. As a consequence of that, he'd been beaten by the Torture Princess. But even so, Vlad was no mere human. He'd fed a demon's flesh to Elisabeth, his successor, and he'd no doubt partaken of demon flesh himself.

If that were the case, though, then which demon's flesh had he consumed?

Vlad gave a hearty laugh, and his expression contorted into one of pure evil, a sight Kaito hadn't seen in quite some time. The man whose very existence seemed demonic went on in a honeyed murmur.

*"When I was searching for a way to summon a demon, I arrived at the most efficient way to attain the power I desired. And after negotiating with the individual who brought me that information, I received a demon's flesh from him as well."*

"Who was that?"

Kaito's response was near-automatic. A glimmer of bloodlust flashed across his eyes.

*Just like Vlad, that guy's responsible for the fourteen demons terrorizing the world. And if not for him, the Torture Princess wouldn't have had to fight... Well, I guess in that case, her illness would have killed her, but still. Still! Vlad's real body got burned at the stake, but what about that guy? Is he still alive?*

If whoever it was was still in good health, Kaito had an idea of how to proceed. As Vlad watched Kaito's fierce reaction, his smile grew broader and broader. But in the next moment, he gave a theatrical shrug.

Then he shook his head, as though disappointed.

*"Oh goodness, to think it had still escaped your notice. Why, I doubt you so much as suspected a thing! Quite frankly, I'm astonished! I can't say I was much help on that front, but still. For you to be this dull..."*

"Quit playing around and spit it out already. What was it I didn't suspect?"

Kaito had recoiled upon hearing Vlad's wording. He'd been implying the mystery individual was someone Kaito knew. But even counting both his lives together, the number of people Kaito knew was hardly vast. He frantically racked his brain.

*Who could it be? Who do I know that...?*

*"...!"*

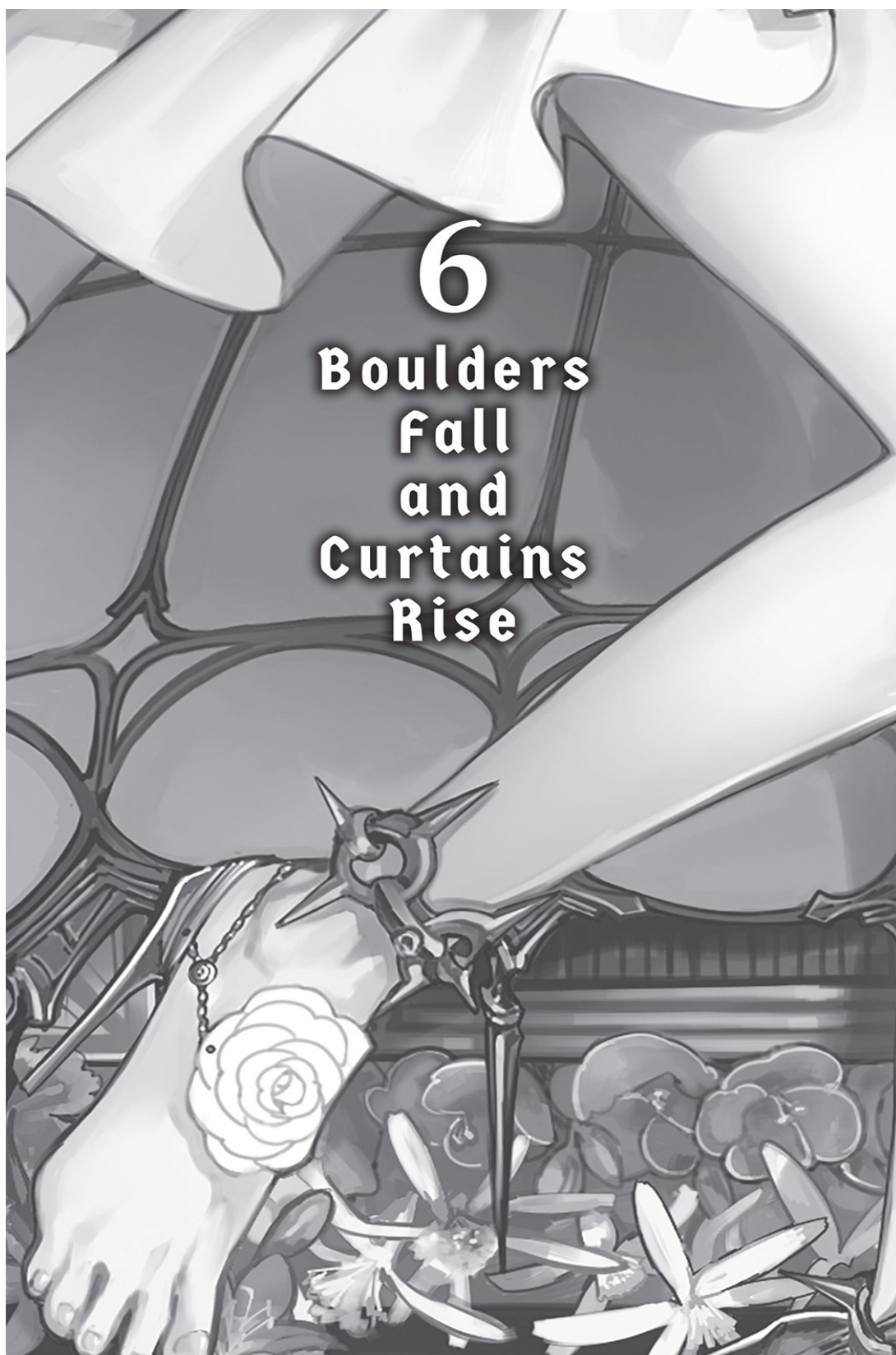
*"...Hina?"*

Hina reacted, having thought of the party in question quicker than Kaito. He looked at her, silently asking her what answer she'd arrived at. But he couldn't bring himself to ask. Her face had gone terribly pale.

"It can't be," she silently mouthed.

*"Oh, but it can,"* said Vlad's smile.

*"The Butcher told you himself, did he not? He deals in meats, no matter what kind of meats they may be."*



# 6

## Boulders Fall and Curtains Rise

F r e e m d T o r t h u r c h e a n



## **6**

### **Boulders Fall and Curtains Rise**

The crimson cylinder collapsed to the ground as drops of blood.

Then they faded, leaving Elisabeth standing silently behind in the underground chambers beneath her castle.

She'd used her teleportation circle and returned from her hometown.

The passages beneath her castle smelled of mold, and an indistinct moaning sound echoed within their walls. Elisabeth strode through the halls, making her way toward her bedroom. She maintained her brisk pace as she passed the ominous designs that were cast in the light streaming through the castle's colored windows.

As she walked, she found her brow furrowing. The air smelled of smoke, and it carried with it the fragrant aroma of meat cooking. As she expected, the smell grew stronger the closer she got to her destination.

With a displeased look on her face, she yanked open the door to her bedroom.

Inside, she discovered that the disaster within was as much as it had been when she'd left.

In fact, it had even grown worse.

A fire was blazing atop her floor. It was a mystery where he'd gotten the kindling from, but the Butcher had rebuilt his bonfire, and the tripods surrounding it were far sturdier than the ones he'd been using before.

A skewered slab of meat hung atop the flame from an iron rod. As far as Elisabeth could tell, the meat seemed more or less respectable.

As he rotated the rod, the Butcher was once more lavishly seasoning the meat.

Then he noticed Elisabeth's presence.

"Aha, welcome back, Madam Elisabeth! Hark and be gladdened! For dinner, your Butcher has oh-so-thoughtfully prepared you a basilisk roast!"

"...I see."

Elisabeth's response was uncharacteristically blunt, and her tone was oddly cheerful.

No sooner had she taken a step toward the bed than she flopped forward into it. She buried her face in her downy pillow. Then, shoving aside a stray wine bottle, she closed her eyes.

While adjusting the flame's heat, the Butcher tilted his head to the side. "Puberty is a trying time, I suppose," he murmured quietly to himself.

The crackling of the flame filled the room. From time to time, beads of fat would drip off the meat and sizzle in the fire.



For a time, the two of them were silent.

Eventually, though, Elisabeth mumbled a few words.

"Oy, Butcher. About that time you first came to this castle."

"Ah, that takes me back! I found myself wondering, however did you manage your shopping before I came along? Goodness gracious, Madam Torture Princess, I imagine that must have been quite the ordeal."

"Aye, quite so. 'It's a good thing you found the one butcher willing to come all this way to such a remote locale,' you once said to me. I found myself in hearty agreement."

"Oh, very much so, very much so. Ha-ha, I imagine I really am the only one who'd come to a place such as this."

The Butcher proudly puffed up his chest as he happily waxed nostalgic about the past. As he vigorously rotated the tripod-supported rod, dribbles of fat continued splashing against the flames.

Elisabeth's tone lowered as she posed him her next question.

"A question, then. Why did you decide, out of the blue, to come peddling your wares here?"

"Hmm? Well, I do pride myself on customer acquisition. I'm the model merchant, if I do say so myself."

"You showed no fear, not even when dealing with the Torture Princess. A sinner without peer. Much to the contrary, you treated me as though I'd been a patron of yours for years. And even today, you behave much the same. Demons are constantly involved in my affairs, yet you show not the slightest inkling of fear. Why, you seem all but accustomed to them."

"Well, you know, I've always been a rather plucky man...plucky demi-man?"

"Tell me, Butcher. Have you, by any chance, ever had dealings with Vlad?"

The moment her words came out, the Butcher went silent.

For a moment, an unnatural silence filled the room. The flames crackled, and the fat dripped.

Then, in a terrifyingly dispassionate voice, Elisabeth resumed the conversation.

"That was the reason you came peddling to the Torture Princess's castle so unfalteringly. You'd known that Vlad had been captured, and you knew what was sure to follow."

The Butcher gave no answer. Eventually, though, he let out a hollow laugh.

"Hmm, well, I racked my brains with all my might, but you see, I have oh-so-many customers. Remembering the names of each and every person I've done business with, well, now, that's just a little..."

"What did you sell him?"

Elisabeth cut the Butcher's reply short and got right to the heart of the matter.

The Butcher went silent again. The only sound was that of the bonfire's crackling. The Butcher deliberately turned the rod. When the meat had finally been fully cooked, he cracked pepper over it to deepen the flavor. Satisfied with the result, he turned back toward Elisabeth.

Then, from within the abyssal darkness of his hood, he peered at her.

"...Whatever might you be talking about?"

As always, his expression was concealed. But Elisabeth instinctively knew.

The Butcher was wearing a twisted smile.

*"Spiked Hare!"*

As Elisabeth yelled, crimson flower petals and black feathers swirled up into the air. A wooden roller filled with iron nails materialized, then began rolling toward the Butcher to crush him.

His response came quickly. With the same graceful movements he'd displayed countless times before, he evaded the torture device.





The bonfire was scattered. The fire went out, and the meat was crushed.  
All his efforts had gone to waste.  
Despite that, though, the Butcher still *smiled*.  
An unfathomable grin still lurked beneath the deep darkness of his hood.



“Wait, hold up a second. The Butcher? There’s no way; he’s just your plain old demi-human merchant!”

The shout practically ripped itself from Kaito’s mouth. In his mind, he could visualize the Butcher’s familiar hooded likeness hopping up and down in protest. But Vlad merely replied to Kaito’s objections with a shrug.

*“An honest assessment from an honest man, my dear successor. Come now; the mere fact that he went peddling his wares at the Torture Princess’s castle should have been more than enough proof of his irregularity. The Kaiser made a fine point, you know. If you don’t do something about that earnest nature of yours, you’re liable to get yourself killed one of these days. Take this as a lesson.”*

An unpleasant grin spread across Vlad’s face once more.

He stroked his cheeks with his white-gloved fingers.

*“After all, in this world where demons dwell, those deserving of trust are few and far between.”*

As he stood in the center of that unfamiliar town, Kaito felt a deep dizziness come over him. It felt like the faces of the corpses surrounding him were curled into mocking sneers. He pressed down lightly on his forehead, trying to calm down.

Everything that had happened up until then flashed back through his mind.

*He has a point—the Butcher’s way too strong to be any ordinary merchant.*

The Butcher’s past was shrouded in mystery, and he seemed borderline fearless. And on top of that, he even kept a dragon as a mount.

Kaito and Elisabeth had often found themselves pondering what his true nature was. But no matter how many of his peculiarities they uncovered, it had somehow felt like they were all in character for him.

Furthermore, the Butcher had helped Kaito out on a number of occasions in the past, each time with the same distinctively upbeat manner.

*But still, he’s right about what the Butcher told me.*

*“I can procure any meat you desire, so long as it is ‘meat.’ I await your instruction.”*

Did that include demon meat, too?

Kaito felt almost as though the ground beneath his feet was crumbling.

*What secrets were lurking behind the surface of all those desperate battles I fought?*

Ever since the new Torture Princess had shown up, everything had gone off the rails.

It was like the very stage they were standing on had started crumbling beneath his feet. Kaito still couldn't make out what lurked in the abyss beneath it. He didn't even know if it was something that mortals were meant to see.

"Well then, let me repeat myself once more. Act as my loyal servant, Kaito Sena. All this is for the sake of salvation."

*What the hell do you mean, "well then"?!*

The situation was chaos, and Kaito gave an internal scream out of frustration. He turned his hollow gaze toward Jeanne.

The golden Torture Princess had appeared out of nowhere, then proudly proclaimed herself a saint and a whore.

Then she'd gone on and on about "salvation" this and "salvation" that.

How noble. The young girl, a saint, was going to save the world.

At that thought, Kaito found himself filled with a seething sense of irritation and doubt.

What was "salvation" anyway? Why did the world even need to be saved?

"What does me serving you have to do with salvation? All fourteen demons are dead. Elisabeth Le Fanu sacrificed everything to defeat them! The threat to humanity is over. Why'd they send you out into the world so late? What the hell were you created to fight?!"

**"It ain't over for shit. Things are just getting started, you stupid little Hanged Man."**

His question had been heartfelt, but the reply he'd received was full of scorn.

Kaito's eyes went wide. But his fierce irritation had the opposite effect as one would expect on his emotions and caused their heightened state to subside. He placed his rebuttal on hold, then patiently waited for Jeanne to finish explaining.

The chains on her wrists rattled as she raised her index finger.

Then she pressed it against her lips, as though she were sharing some great secret with him.

"The curtain has only just begun to rise. In fact, it was the two of you Lovers who set it off."

Kaito and Elisabeth weren't in any romantic relationship to speak of. But as Jeanne spread her arms wide, that was what she'd likened them to. Her face still expressionless, she gave a single spin, as though trying to wrap the entire world in her embrace.

Then, in the town assailed by death, Jeanne made a bold proclamation.

"The fourteen chess pieces were successfully destroyed, but the board has become severely cracked. What did a certain group think when they saw those tainted wounds? What did they wish for, and what did they begin plotting? The problem lies therein."

As always, it was difficult to tell what Jeanne was talking about. But with the bearing of a great prophet, she went on.

"If things continue as they are, the world will perish 'just as planned.'"

Smiling as she made her declaration, Jeanne opened her mouth to continue speaking. For once, it looked like she was going to elaborate on her explanation. But suddenly, she stopped and snapped her fingers instead.

*Snap!*

*—Grrr?*

The beast made completely of fangs reared its head from within Deus Ex Machina.

Jeanne spoke softly, as though she were sending her own child out into the world.

"Go on now, Bandersnatch. Duty calls."

The moment she did, the beast took off at a dash. The stone ground cracked in its wake.

As the beast sprinted, it damaged everything it came in contact with. The fangs comprising its skin, muscle, and bone undulated. Bandersnatch was both an individual and a collective, and it glistened with a sinister shade of silver. It looked almost like a school of small fish swimming together in the shape of a monster.

Then it kicked off against a wall and pulverized the bones affixed to the surface as it leaped high into the air.

A figure began to emerge from behind the building, and Bandersnatch sank its fangs into it. There was a hard, crunching sound.

The initial blow had been stopped by a metal arm—its foe was wearing silver armor. But the beast's face collapsed, and its fangs began whirling freely. One by one, it drove them into the armor's joints.

A dull scream echoed through the air. Blood gushed forth and trickled onto the cobbled ground.

As the armored figure reeled back, the lily crest on their chest came into view.

Upon seeing their foe's attire, Kaito let out a puzzled cry.

"...A paladin?"

He'd never have expected his pursuers to make it this far. In fact, he was fairly shaken. But Jeanne shook her head and refuted what he was thinking.

"The paladins aren't here in pursuit of you, mister. I'm their target."

"You? Wait, the paladins *know* about you? They know about the second Torture Princess?"

"Yes. Or rather, a small group of them do, a group operating directly under a faction within the Church's leadership. To be even more precise, it could be said I'm at fault for the Church nudging you toward this territory."

"...What?"

Kaito shouted in sheer astonishment. As far as he was aware, he'd come to the beastman lands of his own volition.



Before their eyes, the paladin had fought through the pain to draw his sword and was trying to use its handle to extricate the metallic beast from his flesh. Bandersnatch separated from the paladin; either it had thought the resistance disagreeable or had merely determined the situation to be inefficient. As it landed, its whole body trembled.

Then, letting out a howl, it began launching fangs from its front like bullets.

The paladin clumsily swung his sword, but the act was wholly inadequate to repel the veritable buckshot coming his way. Fangs pierced into the gaps in his joints and helmet in rapid succession. Blood burst out, staining the ground a ghoulish shade of red.

Unaffected by the spectacle, Jeanne spoke dispassionately.

"Belated though it may be, allow me to clear up one of your misunderstandings. I was not the one responsible for the beastfolk massacres. I accumulated all the pain I needed here. **Also, like hell I'd have killed them in such a gross way.**"

"What?! Then what was up with that machine in the village?"

"I sent that one out to test how strong you were, mister. It would have killed you if you'd failed, but it seems you narrowly passed. **And damn, do I mean narrowly! You cut that crap hella close!**"

Kaito was taken aback. Apparently, losing to that machine would have meant his death either way.

Continuing on unabashedly, Jeanne laid out new information about the massacres' perpetrators.

"My pursuers must have figured out my intentions to get in contact with you after I set out from here. Because of that and the fact that they needed to gather pain, they invaded the beastfolk territories, committed the murders, provoked Vyade, and intentionally leaked the information about the battle against the Earl. In doing so, they lured you away from the human lands and, in turn, away from the prying eyes of the rest of the Church. Then they deduced I'd take you here to give you your explanation. If things had gone well for them, they would have been able to kill both of us without having to make any overt public moves. That was their scheme."

"Wait, hold up. If you're right about all that...then that means not only are the masterminds humans, but they're from the Church, too?"

Kaito's blood froze. Even if they were just members of a fringe cell within the Church, if Lute and Vyade found out who the perpetrators were, then war was inevitable. But Jeanne shook her head.

"Whether or not the killers were human is a difficult distinction to make. You noticed it too, right, mister, that the atrocities in the villages wouldn't have been possible for humans to commit? You were correct. After all..."

At that moment, Kaito realized something.

The battle between the paladin and the beast was unfolding in an unexpected manner. The way the paladin was swinging his sword didn't match up with the severity of his wounds. Upon closer inspection, each and

every one of the fangs wedged in the openings of the paladin's armor was being pushed out from within. Trails of blood followed them through the air as they clattered to the ground.

"...the slaughterers had undergone *transformations*."

Bandersnatch let out a wary cry. Then it lifted its silver head and howled. To put it in terms from Kaito's old world, the way it proceeded to shoot out its fangs was like machine-gun fire.

The paladin took them head-on. But even with his eyes crushed and swathes of his skin riddled with fangs, he still held his sword aloft and hurled it with deadly accuracy. The blow rippled across the beast's body as the sword impaled it through the midsection.

After taking the attack, the beast lay in pieces. But the scattered fangs quickly resumed their original formation, and Bandersnatch reassumed its stance. The paladin stood before it, having somehow completely stanchd his bleeding. Upon closer inspection, his flesh had begun swelling peculiarly. A grotesque pink shade had stopped up his wounds and was bulging out of the openings in his armor.

Humans didn't metamorphose like that. Seeing the repulsive spectacle, Kaito found himself at a loss for words.

*Is he even human?*

Given the paladin's state, it was difficult to say for certain.

Bandersnatch and the paladin squared off against each other. Then came an ominous rattling noise.

A number of other silver-armored men had made their appearances. But something about them was off. All of them, the one Bandersnatch had just shot included, were emitting low groans from beneath their helmets. Then suddenly, one member of the group looked Kaito's way.

"Urr...grr...ahh...ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

The moan turned to a howl, and the paladin charged at him.

As he did, Hina stepped in front of Kaito. In concert with the sharp maneuver, she brought her halberd crashing down.

"Not one step closer to my beloved husband, you wretch!"

The paladin she was facing off against swung his sword up from below. Each of their weapons carved a wide arc before crashing into the other.

Sparks flew. As they did, the impossible occurred once more.

“...!”

Hina had swung her halberd down, and the paladin had swung his sword up.

The two of them were vastly different when it came to reach and stance. But despite having every possible disadvantage working against him, the paladin had managed to stop Hina's blow. No normal human would have had the strength to pull such a feat off.

Perplexed as he was, Kaito snapped his fingers as calmly as he could.

"*La* (dance)."

A blade came hurtling out of thin air and flew at the paladin's flank. But the strike, which Kaito had carefully calculated to avoid being fatal, was knocked out of flight by another silver knight. The new paladin had stopped the blade with strength alone.

Before Kaito could manipulate it again, the paladin hurled it. The blade cleft deep into the surface of the road.

Hina and the paladin she faced continued trying to push each other away. With the distance between them having grown, Hina stiffened her guard.

Kaito bit down on his lip. He'd been holding back during his last attack, but still, no human should have been able to stop it with brawn alone. Or to put it another way, *no human was meant to be able to*.

"What's up with these guys? They look like paladins, but are they abnormal or something?"

"Allow me to ask you a question, mister. Are you positive you saw the Monarch die?"

A surprising question came from Jeanne. As soon as she spoke, Bandersnatch leaped in front of the paladin who'd blocked Kaito's blade, casually taking over Kaito's fight.

Kaito was on the verge of giving Jeanne an answer, but he stayed silent instead. He'd tortured the Monarch, then killed him. Kaito was certain he'd decapitated the wailing, agonizing demon. But there was something tugging at him, preventing him from giving an authoritative answer. Then recollection of a certain fact jolted through his brain like lightning.

*After they die, demons collapse and turn into a cloud of black feathers.*

Kaito hadn't properly seen the Monarch's death through to the end.

"N-no. I cut off his head, but I didn't make sure he did the final transformation."

**"I fuckin' knew it, ya stupid piece of shit. You are quite the Fool!** Even if they're beheaded by a guillotine, human beings can survive for several seconds. And demons can take even longer than that to die. Someone must have reattached his head and kept him alive. I caught a glimpse of some Church documents detailing how you tortured him in order to amass power, mister, but did you by any chance leave behind a magical formula of healing?"

"Yeah...I did."

Everything Jeanne had pointed out had been right on the mark. Kaito had been done with the formula, but he'd left it beneath the cage regardless. The Church reviled dark magic. He'd assumed they'd erase it by the following day, but Jeanne refuted that notion.

"Reusing that formula would have been feasible. They could have erased the part that transferred pain but left the part that healed. In doing so, they could shave off as much meat from the Monarch as they wanted, completing their magical rite. **Wouldja look at that? The Monarch became a handy piece of livestock! A fine, good-lookin' swine!**"

"Using a demon as livestock and harvesting their meat... You can't mean that they...!"

**"That's right, bud—they chowed down."**

Jeanne's reply was blunt.

As she pointed toward the paladin Hina was fighting, the chains on her wrists rattled.

"Those men were induced to consume the flesh."

Kaito's gaze swung toward the paladins so fast that it was like he'd been slapped.

Their faces were all covered by helmets. There was no way for him to tell if any one of them had been a member of Izabella's squad or someone else he knew. The only thing he could make out was that they clearly weren't sane.

The eyes peering out from within their helmets were bloodshot and tinged with madness, and crimson foam was frothing around their mouths.

Kaito recalled something Jeanne had just said.

*They needed to gather pain.*

"If one must consume the flesh of demons, there is an optimal portion size, and it takes several years before its roots finish spreading through people's bodies to the point of being bearable. But they each ate more than double that amount. In their current states, they're little more than weapons, seeking out the pain of others to alleviate their own. **They ain't nothin' more than pawns to be used up and chucked aside.**"

As a result, the paladins hadn't hesitated in carrying out those massacres.

The strung-up corpses flashed across Kaito's mind. Just like he'd suspected, that had all been assembly-line work dispassionately carried out with the intention of causing pain. And just as Vlad had suggested, whoever was designating the sites of the murders must have been selecting them with their own personal amusement in mind.

*In one sense, that was definitely a demon's doing, but in another, it was a human's.*

"I had no idea this was how—"

"Feeling personal responsibility for this would be both illogical and pointless. You're a very kind person, mister. And even though you might be **an incorrigible asshat**, this turn of events was *bound to occur regardless*."

Jeanne gave him a light shrug. Kaito clenched his fists tight.

As they did, Hina had begun pushing the paladin back and was now swinging her halberd in earnest. The paladin fell back in order to avoid her torrential blows. Taking on a bestial stance, she spoke in a low voice.

"You would do well not to underestimate the depths of my love. Take a single step forward if you do not value your life."

The paladin fighting Bandersnatch had retreated in much the same way. But the corrupted paladins hadn't given up yet. Five more members joined

them from the group hanging back. Apparently, their plan was to win with sheer numbers.

Kaito and Hina stood at the ready again. The Kaiser scoffed, motionless. Vlad crossed his arms.

Then Jeanne listlessly gave an order.

"Bandersnatch, my first, Gargantua, my second, Jabberwocky, my third, and Pantagruel, my fourth—don't let them flee."

One of them was a beast made of nothing but fangs. Another was an automaton, shaped like a human except for its fatally warped frame.

One of the other monsters was a lizard with limbs made from pipes and wings of glass. And the final one was a bipedal suit of armor with no visible seams on its body.

The four of them advanced, their movements perfectly controlled.

Then silver streaks flashed across Kaito's vision.

A metallic mass had appeared in front of the paladins. Even upon seeing the "thing" in full, Kaito still found himself unable to properly parse it. In all likelihood, it was beyond mankind's ability to comprehend altogether.

*What the hell...is that?*

It was firm, and it was supple. It was a sword, a shield, a bullet, and a wing. It was massive, twisted, and formless. Its whole body was both curved and straight, and it writhed as it bore down on its foes.

Then, at long last, Kaito realized what it was.

*Deus Ex Machina breaks down its component parts, then combines them at will, transforming into something completely new each time.*

As befitted the name *Deus*, the lot of them were normally just parts of one, larger weapon. They ran their hard, metal, lance-like conical feelers gently along the ground. Their movements were wholly inconsistent with their forms, and the attacks they launched defied all human expectations. With each strike, they severed the paladins' arms and legs, silver armor and all.

Countless limbs went flying through the air. The scene would have been funny if it wasn't so grisly.

They didn't know if the paladins had eaten the demon flesh of their own volition. As Kaito was about to stop the tragedy by calling that fact out, though, he swallowed back his words. Before his eyes, the paladins' wounds had begun roiling.

Their pink flesh began swelling up, burbling horribly as it did. It began taking on the shape of arms and legs.

One paladin's helmet went flying off, exposing his face below.

"Grblargh, brglahhhhhh, brglahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

His eyes had turned almost completely inside out, and his engorged lips were tearing even as he cried. His veins had risen to the surface, forming a grotesque, melon-like lattice over his face.

Even if they left the paladins alive, they were beyond help.

Jeanne's voice as she stared at the hellish spectacle was even and dispassionate.

"They ate the Monarch's flesh. What meat did Vlad and I eat, then? That was what you asked me as you buzzed about like a fruit fly, **or maybe like a giant pain in my ass**. It is necessary for you to know, so tell you I shall. Or rather, I shall show you. It is necessary, so that is what I shall do. It's become **noisy as shit** around here, after all."

And with that, Jeanne shrugged.

As Deus Ex Machina continued one-sidedly butchering the paladins, Jeanne turned her back on the fight.

Her honey-blond hair swayed as she walked, her gait so light that she nearly seemed to be dancing. She approached one of the corpses on the walls, the one she'd pointed out to Vlad earlier, and the only one whose bones were adorned with gold. They'd probably been an important figure, even for an alchemist.

Jeanne reached out toward the rose-colored gem resting on the corpse's necklace.

**"Time to bring down the house. The end."**

A hard, crunching noise rang out. Jeanne had, for whatever reason, crushed the gem in her bare hands.

Its rosy fragments scattered through the air. That was when it started.

A violent quake ran through the town, as though some sort of lever had been pulled.

Unable to keep his footing, Kaito lost his balance. That very instant, Hina took off at a dash and extended her arms outward. Half-hugging him, she propped him up gently, yet firmly.

"Master Kaito, please put your arms around me."

"Right, thanks."

The two lovers wrapped each other in a tight embrace, and in doing so, endured the steadily worsening tremors.

The sky, the earth, and everything in between was shaking.

It felt as though the end of the world had arrived.

Roused by the noise, Vlad let out a rare cry of admiration.

*"Oh, how bold! And how calculated! A mechanism designed to flatten an entire town!"*

Kaito followed Vlad's line of sight. Red lights were flashing in succession at the base of the two mountains. It would seem magic circles had been concealed among the rocks and trees. One after another, the dazzling light carved away at the mountains' surfaces. Each one empowering the next, the lights snaked their way up to the peaks.

A loud, massive explosion rang out. Then the two mountains began crumbling as though they'd been struck by lightning.

As a consequence, rocks began raining down on the village.

"Sorry, Hina! I'm gonna have to leave evasion to you!"

"I don't mind in the slightest! I shall protect you to the last!"

Hina quickly scooped Kaito up. The footwork she then displayed in avoiding the boulders wouldn't have been out of place at a fashionable ball. Kaito used his beastly arm to bat away some of the smaller rocks.

One of the paladins got crushed. Deus Ex Machina, on the other hand, casually pulverized the boulders coming its way with its metal arms. The Kaiser languidly bit one in half. Vlad, being phantasmal, merely shrugged, then vanished.

As for Jeanne, she simply looked up at the sky.

The way she gazed up at the heavens, one would think she was watching a gentle rainfall.

The boulders fell atop everyone equally.

That, more than anything, made it feel like punishment meted out by the heavens.

The alchemist's hidden village was crushed, as though it had invoked divine wrath. But the one who'd brought it about was none other than the girl, the village's sole surviving inhabitant.

"Now should be a good time."

Suddenly, Jeanne set off. The rattling from the chains on her wrists could be heard all throughout the crumbling town. Then she began elegantly twirling. As she did, Deus Ex Machina took its place by her side.

Its fused form collapsed, and its four sub-components joined Jeanne in her dance. They waltzed, as though to extol her, and mana began gathering between them. Golden flower petals started whirling up.

"Master Kaito!"

"Yeah, let's go!"

Kaito and Hina hurriedly made their way into the circle. The Kaiser followed after them. The remaining paladins also rushed forward but were repelled by the wall of gold petals and white feathers.

Then the teleportation circle activated, mercilessly abandoning the paladins to their fates.

Paying no heed to their howls, Jeanne spoke.

"Now then, to continue from where I left off before I was so rudely interrupted. The demon's flesh we ate. A visit to the Capital's abandoned underground tomb should make it quite apparent where we obtained it from. And that is where I intend to show to you..."

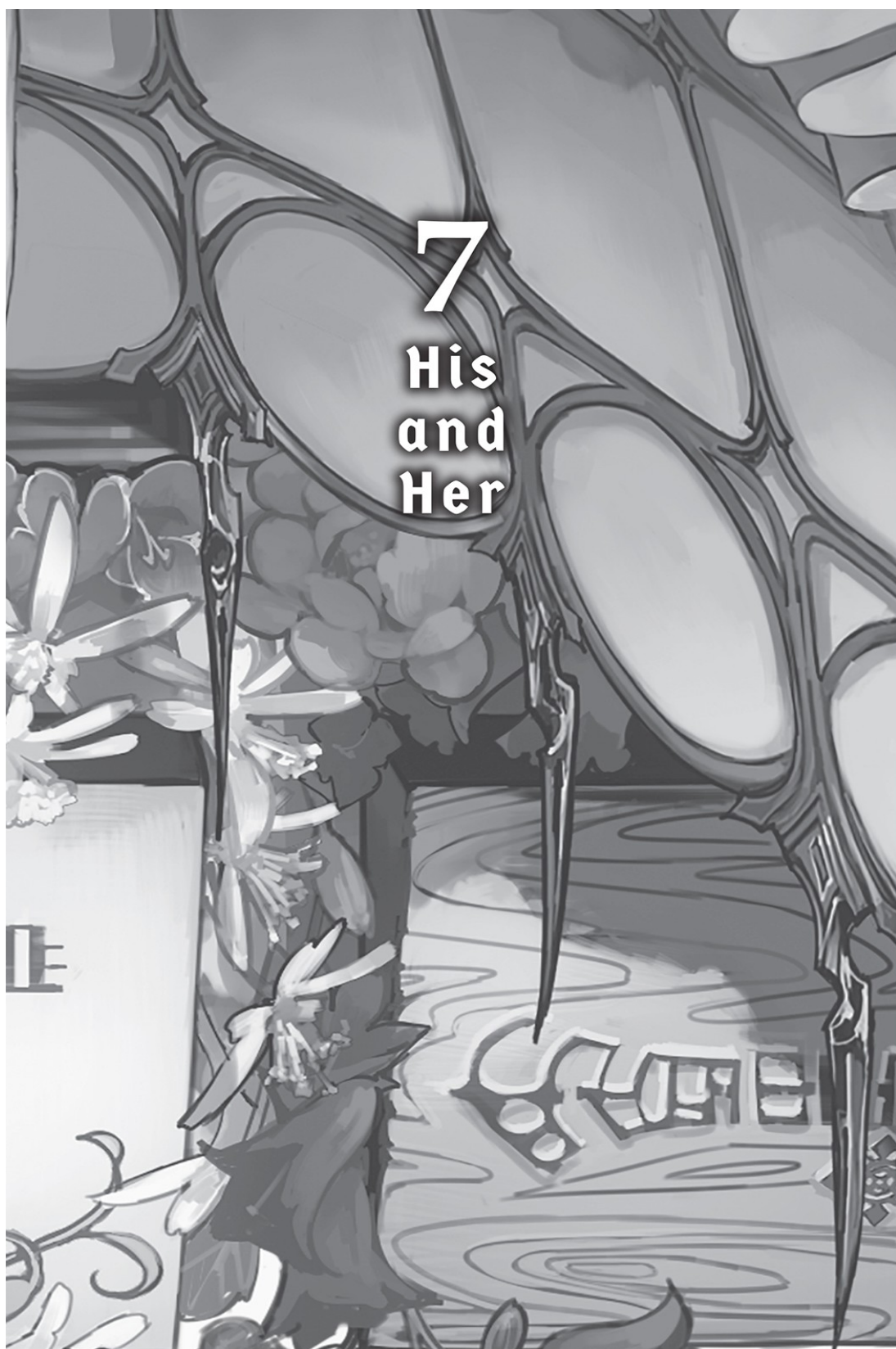
Gorgeous, cold light began filling their vision.

Then they left the crumbling village behind.

Jeanne continued, as though to build up anticipation.

"...a true nightmare, the likes of which you stray sheep have never seen before."





# 7

His  
and  
Her

F r e e m d T o r l o r c h e n





## 7 His and Her

The Butcher leaped high into the air, clinging to the wall to avoid Elisabeth's opening blow.

Spiked Hare carved a victimless path across the floor in vain and nearly smashed through the door. Right before it could, though, Elisabeth snapped her fingers, and the torture device vanished back into darkness and crimson petals.

"Tch, cease your dashing and your scurrying!"

She was well aware of the Butcher's evasive capabilities. Not letting her guard down for a moment, she summoned another vortex of darkness and petals. Then she drew a sword with crimson runes carved on its blade from within.

*"Executioner's Sword of Frankenthal!"*

At the top of her voice, Elisabeth called out the sword's name. As she did, the runes on the blade flashed.

His tone implying an odd sneer, the Butcher read them aloud.

*"You are free to act as you will. But pray that God shall be your salvation. For the beginning, the middle, and the end all lie in the palm of His hand, 'was it?"*

His voice had a certain scornful ring to it.

In place of a reply, Elisabeth pointed the sword's tip at him. A number of chains burst out of empty space.

Neither flustered nor panicked, the Butcher merely kicked off against the wall. The chains violently swerved like the heads of a hydra as they pursued him. Assailed by the surging attack, the Butcher bent his body like a cat as he fell.

The action seemed almost thoughtless, and the chains grazed over his head and beside his flank. Ultimately, he managed to slip through all of them, and with a thump, he landed safely on the floor.

He could well have a promising career in front of him as a circus acrobat.

Without sparing a moment to congratulate him, Elisabeth snapped her fingers again.

*"Ducking Stool!"*

"Good heavens!"

A chair sprouted from the ground, scooping the Butcher up in its seat. The next moment, leather belts sprung out from its back and its armrests,

binding his body down. And at the same time, a rectangular chunk of floor beneath the chair vanished.

The gaping hole was filled to the brim with water. Crimson flower petals floated on its surface.

*Splashhhhhhh!*

A loud noise echoed in the room as the Butcher sank underwater.

A number of bubbles floated to the surface. But after a moment, the water's surface grew calm.

The Butcher didn't appear to be putting up much of a fight.

"Hmm."

Finding that fact suspicious, Elisabeth snapped her fingers. Chains clanged as they dragged the chair up from the water. It was empty. The Butcher was nowhere to be seen.

"I did tell you; if I wish to call myself *the Butcher*, then surely, I should be able to flip over my body within my cloak the moment before I get strung up. When one lives as long as I have, they develop a knack for escaping restraints."

A playful tone rose from beside Elisabeth. She turned to look to the other side of the bed. At some point, the Butcher had sat down on it, and at present, he was casually swinging his legs.

Elisabeth took a closer look at the Butcher's demeanor. Swinging her sword at him from this range would be child's play. But she suspected the only thing she'd end up destroying was the bed.

*Little point in throwing good money after bad, I suppose.*

For the time being, Elisabeth elected to stop using force. Adjusting her seat on the bed, she turned to face the Butcher. He continued his speech with the same unaffected cheerfulness as always, as though the two of them were merely having an inconsequential chat.

"I've said it before, and I'll say it again, but one really does experience so many things over the course of a long life. Founding the very first guilds, the grand expedition to find the rainbow-hued Mana Egg, leading an army five thousand strong, decorating my beloved dragons..."

"More of your usual nonsense?"

"What would you say if I told you it was all true, Madam Elisabeth?"

The Butcher tilted his head to the side. Elisabeth gave him a long, hard stare.

From the other side of the deep darkness in his hood, he awaited her reaction. She offered no response. He let a few more words slip.

"What would you say if I told you that I hailed from a time before the Saint carried out her duty and fell into her deep slumber, Madam Elisabeth?"

"If that was all, then I daresay I'd do naught. The only bit that catches my attention is the possibility of you being my enemy."

"Whatever are you talking about, Madam Elisabeth?! I'm not your enemy, not in the slightest!"

With that, the Butcher hopped up and down in his standard display of protest.

"I'm not the enemy of anyone *personally*. I'm the enemy of *all things that exist in this world!* That, and I am a merchant."

Elisabeth crossed her legs and leaned forward, her cheeks resting on her palms. She glared the Butcher's way.

His declaration had been extremely troubling, but the tone he continued in was, for some reason, incredibly endearing.

"And not just humans, *everyone* is my enemy. And they are my customers. That is why I was born, and that is why I yet live. Not a lie or falsehood escapes my tongue when I say that truly, everything I've done and everything I do has been for your sakes. All for you, my dear customers. And my, what pleasant days they've been. And that, precisely, is why I know that better than any."

The Butcher gently swung his short, scaled legs from side to side. Then he let out a vaguely heartrending mutter.

"*'For the beginning, the middle, and the end all lie in the palm of His hand.' That, truly, sums up this world.*"

"I see. A rather grim tale, that."

Elisabeth gave a faint murmur. Sighing, she bent her back and calmly uncrossed her slender legs. Then she nonchalantly snapped her fingers.

"I find God rather abhorrent, after all—*Hellhole*."

As she spoke, Elisabeth leaped, leaving only the Butcher behind on the bed.

"Hweh?"

The bedroom shook, and its floor *collapsed*. The broken shutters, the chest of drawers, and the bed were all swallowed up by a conical hole. Within it, a grotesque mass of bugs clamored and buzzed.

Elisabeth was hanging from her sword, which she'd successfully thrust into the ceiling. Raising her face, she looked out at the scene before her. As she'd expected, the Butcher was unharmed. Having adroitly stuck himself to the ceiling, he was currently quite angry. His anger was of a type wholly unbecoming the situation, though, and it almost seemed like it was possible for comical bursts of steam to burst out of his ears.

"How underhanded! I'm trying to have a serious conversation with you here, and I'd appreciate it greatly if you'd stop trying to kill me so heartlessly! We had a deal! You promised!"

"I don't recall promising you anything. Vlad goes without saying, but I loathe any who tell me stories laden with subtext. Oh, and one other thing."

"One other thing?"

"*Gibbet*."

Elisabeth gave her fingers a light snap.

Still hanging from her sword with one hand, she mercilessly summoned yet another torture device.

"Oh, deary me."

A long, narrow swirl of darkness and crimson petals encircled the Butcher from top to bottom. A cramped cage, one that a human could just barely fit in if they stood up straight, materialized, then clamped shut around the Butcher.

With another snap of her fingers, Elisabeth dispelled the Hellhole. She then dropped to the ground and made an elegant landing.

The Butcher remained trapped within his cage. He stroked his jaw in contemplation.

"Simultaneous deployment? That's far too stylish, Madam Elisabeth. Hmm, hmm. To think that I, the Butcher, would become a bird in a cage... Oh? Wait. Might I, by any chance, be playing the role of the captured princess?"

"'Tis far too late for jokes, Butcher. Tell me why you sold the demon flesh. Tell me where you obtained it. Tell me everything you know. Everything you're plotting. Spit out everything it is that you think I might like to know."

"Ah, well, that's Madam Elisabeth for you. Mr. Dim-Witted Servant could never have posed those questions so very economically."

"Do it, or the needles and spears shall make their appearance."

Elisabeth snapped her fingers, causing darkness and petals to flare up once again. The cage was soon surrounded by needles. Their sharpness was immediately apparent. The Torture Princess spoke, her face frozen with an ice-cold glare.

"Taking pleasure in pain and in screams—were you not aware? That happens to be my field of expertise."

"I suppose it is... If that's the case, then I'd wager you'd be well served by visiting the tomb beneath the Capital. A number of things are going to become apparent there right around now, you see."

The Butcher's response was vague. As carefree as his tone was, though, he appeared to be serious. There was no indication that he was joking. But the contents of his claim lacked anything even resembling details.

Elisabeth frowned. Showing no fear toward the needles, the Butcher calmly went on.

"It's a nonsensical little fairy tale, and one that's gone on for a very, very long time. There are those who've worked to bring these events about, and those who've worked to prevent them. I am among the former, but the latter group shall begin to move in earnest quite soon. You'd best be going, Madam Elisabeth."

The Butcher spoke in a tone one might use with a child. His jaw loosened a little, as though he were looking at someone radiant. And even though he was on the verge of being tortured, he spoke with the quiet calmness of an old retiree.

"If I'm being quite honest, your existence was rather outside my expectations. As I always say, I have little interest in the fights between men and demons. After all, they are of little consequence to the result. I'd

never thought someone would rise to oppose the dreadful end of the story that the fourteen tragedies mark the beginning of. And Mr. Dim-Witted Servant is the same. Though your two tales may be small in the scope of things, the results they bear may be monumental indeed... Who knows, after all, how the world may turn from here on?"

"...You speak in riddles. I demand details."

Elisabeth raised her hand, fingers poised to snap.

As she did, the door opened behind her. The voice that crossed the threshold was serious, yet given the situation, it seemed almost carefree.

"Pardon me. Elisabeth, are you... O-oh?"

"Izabella?"

Surprised at the unexpected visitor, Elisabeth wheeled around.

There, she found an attractive paladin sporting silver hair and a mismatched pair of blue and purple eyes. Several hideous scars were etched into her skin. It looked almost like her entire body had burst from within.

In spite of her scars, her face was still beautiful. Izabella curled her lips into a frown.

"I have information and an order I need to convey to you. I apologize for the sudden intrusion, but what exactly is going on here? Are you... disciplining one of your servants or something? You may be the Torture Princess, but I should think this is taking it a bit far, no?"

"Oh, hardly, but there are a number of circumstances at play here. Now then, your business?"

Given the situation, and the fact that Elisabeth had no idea how many people were involved, she could hardly carry out torture right in front of Izabella.

Elisabeth dispelled the needles, leaving only the Gibbet remaining. The Butcher, still standing upright, showed no particular signs of relief. After casting a concerned glance his way, Izabella gave her report.

"An order's come down from above. But even I'm in the dark as to where they got their information from, so I have doubts regarding its credibility. For whatever reason, though, all the soldiers under my command have their marching orders. Please, try not to be too surprised when you hear what I have to say."

"Out with it already! I'd sensed the situation's irregularity the moment you stepped through my door rather than merely sending a message. Just say your piece."

Elisabeth brusquely urged Izabella on. Izabella responded with a short nod.

She herself seemed bewildered by the next words that came out of her mouth.

"Kaito Sena, the Kaiser's contractor, will make his appearance."

"'Will'? Not 'has made his appearance'?"

Elisabeth frowned. The words reeked strangely of prophecy.



After all, although she hadn't told them, Kaito was currently in the land of the beastfolk. The Church shouldn't have had any way of tracking his movements.

How, then, could they predict so confidently where he'd show his face?

"He's slated to make his appearance at the site where the mass of flesh consumed the royal castle—at the underground tomb where all the kings of old lie. But I have no idea what basis they're making that decree under."

*Aye, the reason for their conjecture is unclear. 'Tis as though they saw him perform the teleportation firsthand...*

Elisabeth narrowed her crimson eyes. The sense of discomfort nagging at her was growing by the moment. Then she cast a glance toward the Butcher in his cage. He said nothing, but it was clear that from within his hood, he was smiling.

"I hope it's simply just another byproduct of the general disarray in our chain of command. After Godd Deos passed, a number of strange things have been happening. And the order has another part to it."

Izabella's expression darkened. She, too, was clearly uncomfortable, and likely about the same thing. But after shaking her head, she revealed the grave finale.

"We've been ordered to make absolutely sure we kill him before he can enter the tomb."

It was the moment Elisabeth had surely been waiting for, and the words she'd least wanted to hear.



The dance of the golden light and white feathers came to an end. They transformed into droplets, then all melted away at once.

After they'd completed their extravagant transformation, a new wasteland spread out before them, different from the destroyed village they'd just left behind.

Their surroundings were gray and barren as far as the eye could see. Off in the distance, they could just barely make out a small clump of buildings that had avoided destruction. Upon looking at the distant townscape, Kaito realized that he'd seen it before.

"Wait, this is..."

At the same time, the plot they were standing on was new to him. In fact, even among the people who lived in the Capital, not many would have ever had a chance to set foot here.

Kaito and the others now found themselves in the center of the Capital; before the mass of flesh had consumed the entire area, it had housed a castle hailed as resembling a white rose and also accommodated a grand garden as well as a number of vacation homes belonging to prominent aristocrats.

However, the events that had taken place here had been no ordinary calamity, and not a single trace remained of the buildings that had once been there. As a matter of fact, the land was strangely smooth. It was like some massive monster had run its tongue over the ground and lapped up everything it found.

*And now that I think about it, that's not far off from what actually happened.*

Kaito was well aware of that. After all, this was where the Monarch, the Grand Monarch, and the King had intentionally been set forth to swallow up the land. The center of the Capital had been the heart of human civilization, and the demons had utterly and completely destroyed it. However, there was one thing still standing there, strangely unharmed.

Amid the vast nothingness, a statue of the Saint shedding tears of blood stood tall.

She was hanging upside down, and a rectangular pit sat directly beneath her head. There was a good chance it had originally been locked up tight and covered by a pedestal, but the statue's protection must not have extended that far, and the mass of flesh must have melted it all away. Kaito squinted, trying to make out what was within.

Deep in the darkness, he could make out a set of stairs. They had likely avoided destruction by virtue of being underground.

Jeanne strode forth, her steps light as she made her way toward its entrance.

"Come now, everyone, let's be on our way. In the quest for truth, you must simply put one foot in front of the other. The words *Ask and ye shall receive* are rarely true, but this case is one exception to that rule."

"The 'truth'... What exactly is down there?"

"A place with no connection to the lives of the stray sheep—the ancestral tomb of the royal family. One of the high priests, the Grave Keeper, bears full responsibility for protecting it. But what they're hiding away and guarding so closely aren't just the corpses of **geezers who kicked the bucket.**"

Jeanne gave her answer. Unfortunately, though, she stopped short of the most important part.

She continued on at her leisurely pace. Kaito gazed in frustration at the swaying, honey-blond hair covering her back.

As always, her communication skills were lacking in the extreme.

Then he turned his gaze to the ashen earth around him. The current king and the surviving nobles were taking shelter somewhere else at the moment, and they hadn't gotten around to any sort of restoration effort yet. There was nobody there to interfere with them.

Jeanne kept walking, her strides almost rhythmical.

Now that they'd come this far, there was no turning back.

*In for a penny, in for a pound, I guess.*

Kaito followed after her. Hina and the Kaiser did the same. As Jeanne approached the pit the statue was guarding, though, Kaito noticed a white light flickering at the edge of his vision.

He thought it might just be an optical illusion, but the lone dot suddenly multiplied. One by one, they ignited, like candles arranged in a ring. Cylindrical lights formed in a circle around Kaito and the others.

"Ah, I see. Sure enough, they'd really rather we not enter the tomb. But given that we're in the Capital, they can't exactly use their transfigured paladins. **All right, all right, let's have us a look-see. How do y'all wanna dance?**"

As Jeanne murmured, the lights all transformed into droplets and fell in a cascade, leaving behind people in silver armor.

Jeanne cast a glance at the paladins forming a perimeter around herself and the others as though to appraise them.

**"Enough fucking around... Where is your leader?"**

Right as she spoke, a particularly bright light flashed directly in front of Kaito and the rest.

When the white light bled away, the figure standing in its wake was one that Kaito knew well.

"It's been some time, Kaito Sena."

"...Izabella."

It was the beautiful, silver-haired commander of the Holy Knights: Izabella Vicker.

Kaito was about to say something, but he immediately lost his train of thought. When he'd fled from the Capital, he hadn't had a chance to get a good look at her face. But now that he had a chance to see for himself, he noticed her skin was covered in cruel scars.

They marked the time she'd used summoning magic in the battle for the Capital. Unable to withstand the force of the mana, her body had burst from within.

Kaito unthinkingly let out a shocked cry.

"Those wounds... Did you get those when you performed the summoning?! Dammit, I told you that you were being rash!"

"How strange of you to say that, Kaito Sena. You turned against mankind. That makes me your enemy, so why lend me any sympathy?"

Izabella spoke, her voice filled with puzzlement. Kaito immediately shut up. As the Kaiser shot a mocking glance at him from his side, Kaito bit down on his lip.

*Oh, right... I'm not really in any position to be worrying about Izabella.*

Kaito glanced around the gray Capital. He, Izabella, the Torture Princess, and the paladins had all waged a desperate battle to protect the townscape off in the distance.

Then he shifted his gaze back to Izabella. For a moment, he felt a weighty sense of fatigue press down on his body.

*Those days we spent fighting together feel like they were an eternity ago.*

The situation and the way Kaito now saw the world were so different compared with that episode of his past.

He spent a moment immersed in sentimentality. Izabella, unaware of the things going through his head, continued in a detached tone.

"I'd thought you a decent, honest man. But for some reason, you betrayed humanity. At this late hour, I shan't ask you your reasons. No matter what they may have been, a paladin's duty is to slay demons and their contractors. You prepared yourself for that reality when you made your pledge back at the square, I hope."

"Yeah, that I did. I knew turning my back on humanity would mean becoming your enemy. And even knowing that, I made my choice."

"Then it seems neither of us bears a grudge against the other."

Izabella clutched the hilt of her sword, then drew it in a single smooth motion. The paladins followed her lead. Steel glinted brightly in the gray, muted land. Then, one by one, they pointed their consecrated blades at the Kaiser's contractor.

"Yet we must kill you. For the sake of our orders, for the sake of mankind, and for the sake of the world."

"Oh, how very illogical!"

Suddenly, a loud voice rang out. Its tone was bright and cheery, yet its echo had a strange coldness to it.

Confused at hearing the young girl's voice, Izabella blinked.

"Who-who's there? Who do you have there with you, Kaito Sena?"

"I beg your pardon. It is I."

Jeanne popped out from behind Kaito. She must have hidden there at some point. As she did, Izabella's face twitched. Jeanne's words had been sorely lacking as an introduction, true, but the reason Izabella had stiffened up lay elsewhere.

*Oh, right. Now that I think about it, her getup's even more degenerate than Elisabeth's.*

Jeanne's outfit, opulent and far more lascivious than was appropriate for her age, seemed to have overloaded Izabella's straitlaced brain. She looked to be at a loss for words. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Jeanne dived right in.

"I beg your pardon again, but did you, by any chance, leave your brain behind somewhere, miss?"

"What? What are you—"

"Who did you receive that order from? Who among the Church's leadership suggested it?"

"Wait. What are you implying by that, young lady?"

"Who exactly managed to locate Kaito Sena? It can't have been mere coincidence. Whoever found him must have been tracking his movements. Why, then, did they not report it to the units pursuing him? What was the

order you received, miss? It couldn't have been just to kill the Kaiser's contractor. They must have added the rider 'before he enters the underground tomb,' didn't they? And they surely gave that part of the order the utmost priority, if I had to guess. Why is that, do you think?"

Jeanne mechanically pressed Izabella for answers. Izabella regarded her with suspicion at first, but her expression grew gradually more and more serious.

She'd clearly realized that Jeanne wasn't simply spouting nonsense. Izabella's subordinates exchanged nervous glances as well. They, too, must have found the whole situation fishy.

Still expressionless, Jeanne began talking at insane speeds.

"Have you ever felt as though there were a secret unit among the paladins' ranks? Have you never found it suspicious, the fact that so many of the most promising recruits got snatched away? And after Godd Deos's death, did you not get the sense that suspicious matters began cropping up not just within the paladins but the Church itself?"

As a clincher, Jeanne opened her rosy eyes wide, then posed Izabella a solemn question.

"What proof do you have that all that is for the sake of mankind *or* the world?"

"Who *are* you?"

The way Izabella was addressing Jeanne had clearly changed. Despite Jeanne's age, Izabella was now dealing with her as an equal. The tension in the air took on a different note.

Lowering her sword for a moment, Izabella ventured a question to Jeanne.

*"Just what do you think you're doing, Izabella?"*

A hard, unfriendly voice rang out. Izabella looked up in surprise, and Kaito cast his gaze overhead as well.

One of the Church's communication devices was flying up in the gray sky. While it had the same shape as a normal device of its type, its appearance also seemed to be different in a way. Its abnormal size seemed to almost be a testament to how it had received God's favor. Its pure-white wings were conspicuously oversized as well, creating an overall impression of pomp and splendor.

To put it bluntly, it seemed excessive, and in poor taste.

The person on the other end, likely one of the high priests, droned on in an overbearing voice.

*"A contractor's ears are unfit for a paladin's words. You'll merely sully yourself. Kill him, now."*

"Please, Yah Llodl, wait. She could have information of some—"

*"Nonsense! What kind of fool sits around and listens to what a demon contractor's ally has to say?! Everything coming out of their mouths is a lie, intended to lead the faithful astray! Is that what you want?! This kind of*

*nonsense is why we lost so many men at the Plain of Skewers, and your brother among them!"*

The man's heavy-handed rebuke left no room for arguments or rebuttals. Izabella reflexively bit down on her lip.

Kaito looked up at the orb with scornful eyes. Then, after a few seconds of silence, he calmly spoke.

*"...Yah Llodl, was it? You know, you're not like Godd Deos."*

*"Ah, so even a contractor like you can tell. You're right—I'm different from that man. I'm not the same as that fool who was obliterated by a demon without ever coming to understand genuine faith or the Saint's true will."*

The voice let out a twisted laugh. Godd Deos had been in charge of managing the paladins, and the level of trust they'd placed in him had been high. A number of the paladins standing in waiting trembled with anger.

Kaito heaved a long sigh. With a look of gentle remorse on his face, he shook his head.

*"I once accused Godd Deos of being a spectator. But I take that all back."*

*"How odd. Who knew contractors were even capable of introspection? The man may have been incompetent, but I imagine he'd be gratified by that."*

*"You won't set foot on the battlefield. You won't even show your face. You're the biggest damn coward I've ever met. I can tell just by your voice—you're an overgrown pig of a man."*

*"You—!"*

As Kaito gave his assessment, his tone was dispassionate and uninterested. The voice cut off, appalled by the sudden affront.

Hearing his master's diatribe, the Kaiser gave an amused laugh in a rare display of approval.

*"Ha, he speaks truth! Those who refuse to display their own strength are weaklings! Those who fight without knowledge are fools! Those who titter incessantly are incompetent! Their lives have no value, and they are, to a man, swine!"*

Suddenly, the orb began spinning and emitting light, then gave its wings a hard flap to demonstrate its irritation. White feathers rained down violently from above, and the person on the other side of the orb screeched loudly.

*"A demon dares insult ME?! I live my life properly and piously, in service to the Saint, in service of God, and it insults ME?! Izabella, don't hesitate, don't think, just kill them, kill them, kill them, and do NOT let them advance!"*

As the man flew into a crazed rant, Kaito glanced toward the entrance to the underground tomb.

What could be down there? As he pondered that, Yah Llodl gave a declaration.

*"This is for the sake of salvation!"*

*Salvation again, huh?*

Jeanne spoke of salvation, and so did the Church.

In all likelihood, the difference between the two was monumental.

*What are they each trying to save, and what are they trying to save it from?*

*"Kill them! Why are you hesitating?! Carry out your orders! Follow your righteous command from God, from the Sai-Sai-Sai-Sai-Sai-Sai—"*

Suddenly, the voice started skipping. With no prior warning, an explosion had gone off right below the communication device.

"...Huh?"

"Wh—?!"

Blasted by the explosion's shock wave, the orb went into a tailspin. Its ridiculously large wings proved a detriment as it was quickly blown off into the distance.

The people present had no time to dwell on what had just happened, as their visions were blotted out with crimson and black. Rose petals danced extravagantly through the air. Everything in sight was violently painted over in black.

Desperately trying to hold their ground, the paladins called out.

"Commander Izabella!"

"Settle down; I know whose doing this is! What I don't know, though, is why she's being so vicious!"

The whole area descended into chaos. Even Izabella, who supposedly knew who the culprit was, was visibly trembling. Kaito and Hina, on the other hand, were calm as could be. The two of them let out low murmurs.

".....Welp, she's pissed."

".....She does seem quite upset."

Then, with the same absurdity it had started with, the explosion suddenly subsided.

In an instant, the area grew silent. And in the center of that silence stood a dark young woman.

Her posture was graceful, and her beauty seemed nearly inhuman.

"So you've finally come. The proud wolf. The lowly sow."

Jeanne gave a soft whisper, the first one present to give voice to their wonder. Then, as if to raise the curtain, she continued.

"Torture Princess Elisabeth Le Fanu!"

It was the black Torture Princess.

The huntress of demons, the peerless sinner, had finally made her appearance.



The black Torture Princess and the golden Torture Princess faced off for the first time.









However, the black princess didn't spare the golden princess so much as a glance.

Her crimson gaze was focused on one man, and one man alone.

Her servant, Kaito Sena.

"...Kaito."

"Elisabeth."

Elisabeth called out his name concisely. Kaito replied in kind.

As luck would have it, they were standing in the Capital, surrounded by land consumed and released by the mass of flesh. In many ways, it resembled the moment they'd parted. Back then, when the battle had ended, Elisabeth had been left there alone.

That, too, felt like it had been a century ago.

Elisabeth closed her eyes. Then, just like before, she turned her head up toward the faint rays of sun peeking through the clouds. Every conceivable form of anguish crossed her face: anger, sorrow, grief, and loneliness. Then her expression changed to that of a child, pleading for something unknown. But abruptly, all of that vanished.

She opened her eyes back up once more, then looked at Kaito, her gaze calm and absolute.

A moment later, even that faded.

Her crimson eyes went wide, and she balled her fist up tight. Then, thrusting that same hand forward, she pointed at Kaito with a single black nail.

As she did, she made her bold declaration.

"Brace yourself, Kaito. Your death is nigh."

"Is this really how it has to be?"

Kaito found himself questioning if that was how events were meant to play out.

Surely, there were other things that needed to be said, if nothing else. But before he could lend a voice to his exasperation, a shrill noise rang out.

Apparently, the Church's communication device had recovered from the blast. As it violently flapped its white wings, its puppeteer, Yah Llodl, shouted at the top of his lungs.

*"Ha-ha-ha, splendid, splendid! Well said, Torture Princess, what a fine hound you are! Go on, then—fulfill your role! Remember your sins, and remember the shackles you bear! Until the day of your death, try to do some —"*

With a thump, a stake wedged itself in the talkative orb's center. The voice coming from within cut off.

As it did, Elisabeth spoke, her tone as cold as ice.

"You lot brandish your whips at your chained hounds, driving them as you please. But I am the proud wolf and the lowly sow."

White lights began running all across the communication device.

Then, with a loud *boom*, it exploded in midair.

"I am no mutt."

A cascade of white feathers fluttered down toward the earth, providing a dramatic backdrop for Elisabeth's unwavering declaration.

"Go squeal elsewhere, pig. This is a matter for me and my rage alone."

A few stray feathers landed on her head, and she shook it gently. Her silken black hair flared out, then returned to its resting position.

As the feathers fluttered down to her feet, her expression shifted.

"Now then, Kaito. For a servant, you've been fooling around long enough. I do hope you're ready for your punishment."

Her smile was nostalgic in a sense, but it was also fiendish through and through.

Seeing it, Kaito Sena realized something.

*Ah, I see... I guess we gotta get that out of the way, don't we?*

Elisabeth had made up her mind to punch him with all her strength. Everything else could come after that. In fact, at the moment, nothing else seemed to matter.

She was standing there, and so was he. They'd reunited. That was all there was to it.

And for precisely that reason, Kaito replied with a wicked smile of his own.

"Damn straight I am! I'm more than ready. And I'm ready to fight back, too."

The former master-servant pair glared at each other. Ignoring the bewildered paladins completely, the two of them both began summoning their strength. The air was flush with tension. The force they were emitting was so fearsome that no one dared tell them to stop.

Then, in the next moment, they both cried out at the top of their lungs.

*"Executioner's Sword of Frankenthal!"*

*"La (dance)!"*

Elisabeth drew her sword, and Kaito snapped his fingers.

A blade danced across the ashen ground, and a lavish blast of crimson flower petals and darkness exploded to life.

That was the signal that the curtain had risen on the battle.

Confused as they were, the paladins charged as one.



The battle between the Torture Princess and the Kaiser's contractor had begun. Although they'd been thrown into disarray, the paladins leaped into action as well.

Watching them charge, Hina and the Kaiser sighed. Displeased, the two of them spoke in turn.

"My beloved Master Kaito and my dear Lady Elisabeth are in the middle of their battle, I'll have you know! They don't have time to be dealing with

you small folk! If you all would go lie down and wait like good little children, that would be splendid!"

*"You think of challenging me, with such frail human bodies? How delightful. If the boy weren't such a nag, I'd have gladly gobbled you all up. Not that you lot look to have much meat on your bones, I suppose."*

Hina deftly repelled the paladins' attacks from all directions with her halberd. With a displeased expression on his face, the Kaiser swept away his attackers with his tail alone.

Slowly but surely, the battle had gotten underway. It was a chaotic affair, with little rhyme or reason to it.

Izabella brought her palm to her face in spite of herself.

*Wh-what's going on? This is a mess, and the situation makes no sense. There are too many unsolved mysteries... But even so, trying to bring my men together at this point would be a fool's errand. If I want information, I'll simply have to emerge victorious.*

With that, Izabella made her decision. She readied her sword, prepared to carry out her orders.

It was then that she noticed someone's gaze on her. Jeanne was staring at Izabella, as though in expectation. Then the golden girl gave her fingers an elegant snap.

*"Bandersnatch, Gargantua, Jabberwocky, Pantagruel—go forth."*

One by one, the machines took off. In the space of an instant, Izabella understood—the golden girl meant to oppose her. But even if she squared off against the machines head-on, she was no match for them.

*My blade is unsuited to deal with their kind.*

Fully understanding that, Izabella still dashed toward Bandersnatch. The fanged beast stopped in its tracks, then began shooting fangs at Izabella like bullets.

Refusing to break stride, Izabella drew her spare sword from her back. Then she thrust it into the ground. Kicking off against its hilt, she leaped high into the air. Bandersnatch's fangs met nothing but empty air.

Upon landing, Izabella resumed running. Gargantua moved to block her path. It was shaped like a twisted human figure, but its appearance gave her little to work with as far as figuring out an effective way to take it down. Instead, she dodged it and leaped to the side. The figure followed her in hot pursuit. Without a moment's hesitation, Izabella reached down and scooped something off the ground—the destroyed communication device.

She threw it at the humanoid.

Pierced by the figure's arm, the orb let out a final explosion. The orb itself shattered, but it caused the humanoid figure to violently lurch. Jeanne spoke, the admiration in her voice diminished by her affected tone.

*"Oh my, how unexpected."*

*"Probably blasphemous, what I just did. But it was past the point of being repairable. No harm done."*

Izabella smiled as she spoke. Having slipped past Bandersnatch and Gargantua, she was now standing directly before Jeanne.

Her body brimmed with tension as she squared off against the mysterious girl.

Jeanne's expression was still disturbingly mechanical as a compliment made its way across her lips.

"I see, miss. Foolish as you are, you aren't half-bad for an ignorant pawn of the Church."

Although Izabella had no way of knowing it, the compliment she'd just earned was rare in the extreme.

Jeanne nodded deeply, her honey-blond hair bobbing as she did.

**"I've taken a liking to you. I think I'll keep you for myself, li'l lady."**

"I—I can't help but find your phrasing disturbing, but I have a great many things I want to ask of you, as well! If it's a fight you desire, then I'll gladly oblige!"

Izabella dashed toward Jeanne. A little closer, and her sword would reach her. Before it did, though, Jeanne snapped her fingers.

Bandersnatch reared up behind Izabella. As it did, she made a humiliating realization.

*...She's underestimating me!*

Based on its appearance, Bandersnatch's method of attack was the easiest to gauge of the four. In other words, Jeanne was saying that if Izabella couldn't even deal with *it*, then she had no value as an opponent.

As Izabella was pursing her lips over that fact, the beast leaped. Before it could catch her in its maw, Izabella kicked it in the side. But the beast relentlessly tried to slip its fangs into the joints of her armor.

That very moment, Izabella detached her mantle. Then she scooped up the beast's entire floating, fanged body in it. The sturdy fabric endured for just a moment, which was long enough for Izabella to smash the whole thing—mantle, beast, and all—into the ground.

Then she closed in on Jeanne.

"You're mine!"

As she tried to strike Jeanne's exposed chest with the flat of her blade, though, Jabberwocky leaped forth. The unpleasant-looking machine took the blow in its master's place. Sparks flew, and Jeanne nodded once more.

"Impressive."

"I am a commander, after all."

Izabella showed no signs of stopping. As she drew back her blade, she leveled a palm strike at Jeanne's jaw.

Jeanne blinked in shock, but the surprises would not end there.

"Oh?"

"Huh?"

At that moment, the two of them were both blown to the side.

And it wasn't just them, either—the paladins met the same fate. Only Hina, who'd clung to the Kaiser, managed to endure. The Kaiser himself said nothing, but his annoyance was written all over his face.

Deus Ex Machina frantically reassembled itself, transforming into a warped yet supple metal net. Jeanne swooped down atop it, like a princess being caught by her valet.

Izabella, for her part, managed to twist herself around in the air before sticking the landing on her own. She then looked up, trying to figure out what was going on. When she did, she immediately grasped the situation. She let out a quiet murmur, forgetting for a moment the fact that she was in the middle of a fight.

“...This is chaos.”

A massive Wicker Man had just ruptured from within, its chest shredded to pieces. Kaito, having made his escape, wiped the sweat from his brow. Based on his expression, he was clearly in over his head. After all, normal circumstances would leave him woefully unequipped to go up against the Torture Princess. By some miracle, though, he was managing to endure her relentless attacks.

Elisabeth, on the other hand, showed no signs of letting up.

*“Gibbet! Ducking Stool! Hellhole!”*

“Takes me back, y’know, watching you go all-out like that!”

Kaito let out a half-desperate shout as he dashed. And just as he'd implied, the space around was growing more dangerous by the moment. One of the paladins fell into the pit of man-eating bugs, and another one hurriedly pulled him out.

As he ran, Kaito avoided it altogether. But one of the five simultaneously deployed Ducking Stools found its mark. Right before he was bound in place and plunged underwater, Kaito called out.

“Kaiser!”

*“What, you can't even deal with this yourself?! I'll have your head if you die on me, O unworthy master of mine!”*

Although he had yelled out in frustration, the Kaiser moved in a flash. Grabbing the back of the chair in his teeth, he hurled it into the air. A tank of water appeared in the ground, but instead of falling, Kaito went flying over it.

Letting loose his blade, he cut himself free from his restraints. He then managed to land safely somehow.

Once more, he and Elisabeth faced each other. He, for one, was exhausted. But Elisabeth's face didn't have so much as a bead of sweat on it. Crossing her arms, she cast an angry glare his way.

“Why do you run, Kaito?”

“Is that a serious question?! If I took that shit head-on, it woulda killed me! C'mon, Elisabeth, hold your fire for a minute and hear me out!”

As Kaito launched his ardent plea, Hina snapped her neck up.

It was hard to make heads or tails of her situation—she was hoisting up one paladin who'd fallen in the water, yet at the same time, kicking away another who'd come to cut her down.

Even though her surroundings had descended into chaos, though, she still spared the time to call out.

"That's right, Lady Elisabeth! Even though I'm Master Kaito's companion, I've been getting the sense that I'd best not intrude in you two's battle! But if you insist on harming my beloved Master Kaito any further, my dear Lady Elisabeth, I will have to stop you, even if it means I must kill you!"

"You too, Hina, enough from you! Not stopping Kaito when he decided to leave... Fools, the lot of you!"

Elisabeth's rebuke was swift and brutal. It was so threatening, in fact, that Hina found herself at a momentary loss for words.

Elisabeth's black hair fluttered as she turned back toward Kaito, before ruthlessly snapping her fingers once more.

*"Iron Maiden. La Guillotine."*

"Man, a guy can't catch a break."

Another vortex of darkness and petals. A pair of maidens, red and white, lined up from within. They each had a decidedly different ambience.

One was bewitching, and the other was pure. But while the impressions that the two statues gave off differed, they had their beauty and monstrous, overwhelming presence in common. As he glared at the two women, Kaito's thoughts raced.

*I wanna get as far back as possible. If Iron Maiden hugs me, it's all over. And from here, I won't be able to deal with the speed of La Guillotine's blades.*

Kaito set off an explosion of mana at his feet. With speed surpassing that of any human, he fled.

La Guillotine brought its arms together as though in prayer, then opened them again. A blade shot out from its elbow at unbelievable speeds. No matter how high Kaito raised his physical capabilities, following them visually would be impossible.

He snapped his fingers, virtually on instinct alone, and launched five blades into the air.

*"La (stop)!"*

One of them crashed against La Guillotine's blade. The strength of the impact sent the two slabs of metal spiraling off in opposite directions. As the paladins scurried about to avoid them, each cleft into the earth and vanished, leaving huge gashes in the ground.

Kaito breathed a sigh of relief. As he did, though, he felt a chilly breeze at his back. Panicking, he whirled around.

*Fu—*

The red maiden was standing there behind him. With a smile full of affection, Iron Maiden extended its arms.



Then its neck was rent to the side. The kindness of its expression didn't waver, even as its head toppled to the ground. It crumbled to pieces, then transformed back into rose petals and scattered.

As it vanished into nothing, Hina stood holding her halberd in Iron Maiden's wake. Her emerald eyes were wide and crazed.

"Only I, his companion, am allowed to embrace Master Kaito, you hunk of junk that knows nothing of love."

"Thanks, Hin— No, get back!"

As Kaito shouted, Hina leaped backward.

Torture devices and chains had mercilessly borne down on him once more.

The back-and-forth between Kaito and Elisabeth continued on in much the same way.

At some point, they'd become the only two still fighting.

The paladins simply gazed at the two of them, dumbfounded. And Izabella had been captured by Jeanne, who'd finally gotten serious. Deus Ex Machina had merged together and was presently pinning her to the ground.

"Stop that at once! Let me go! Are you listening to me?!"

"Quiet now, miss. I don't have any more time to play with you. This is turning out to be quite the show."

Jeanne crossed her arms as she calmly observed the battle.

Desperate as they were, Kaito's efforts were impressive. He continually summoned blades, with no time to even gather his breath. Each time the beheading axes and innumerable iron stakes bore down on him, he drove them back. Occasionally calling on aid from Hina and the Kaiser, he successfully continued prolonging his life.

The difference in strength between him and Elisabeth was overwhelming. But in spite of that, he continued putting up a valiant fight.

Armed with tenacity and zeal, Kaito fought back with all his might.

His actions clearly weren't driven by a fear of death, either. It was as though he was crying out in violent protest.

*"Like hell I'm gonna let Elisabeth kill me," he was screaming.*

*"Like hell I'm gonna let her kill anyone else she cares about," he was screaming.*

"To go to such lengths... Such folly, and such conviction."

Jeanne murmured. Azure and crimson rose petals were whirling like tempests before her eyes.

The two masses coalesced, then crashed straight into each other. Each wave of vividly colored darkness was trying viciously to engulf the other.

Her dress and hair whirling about in the wind, Elisabeth let out a cry.

"You chose to become the enemy of humanity, Kaito! You chose that path yourself, bearing sins you had no business bearing! That being the case, hurry up and present me your neck already!"

"Screw that nonsense! And screw dying! Just listen to me, Elisabeth!"

"No, *you* listen! What's nonsense is becoming mankind's enemy without the resolve to die doing so! You're but a little sheep, bleating with neither determination nor resolve! Cease your foolery!"

"It's not like you wanted to die either, right?! It's *fine*, just *listen*—"

"Time and time and time again... You're the one who refused to listen!"

"What—"

"I told you countless times! There was no need for you to bear those sins!"

Chains shot forth, veritable agents of Elisabeth's frustration. They carved at the ground beside Kaito. Having gone too fast, they also cruelly scraped away at the Saint statue's cheeks. Massive fragments toppled to the ground, and dust billowed up where they fell.

Agitated cries rose up from among the paladins. Elisabeth ignored them as she called out again.

"'Tis a heavy thing, to harm others, to be loathed by the world, and to constantly shoulder sins, I told you!"

"Elisabeth..."

"'Tis too heavy a burden for you to bear, I told you!"

It was like a desperate wail.

Or perhaps the screams of a child.

Hearing her heartbroken voice, Kaito ground his teeth into his lip. He'd never wanted to make her cry.

*I swore to myself that I'd protect you.*

He'd sworn to himself that he'd keep his hero alive, no matter the cost. But had that really been *right*?

Kaito tossed that question around in his mind. Seeing Elisabeth's face, could he state that with any amount of confidence?

*Did I really make the right choice?*

Kaito Sena closed his eyes, just for a moment. His younger self sat before him in the darkness, just like he had once before. The young man innocently yearning for his hero gazed questioningly at Kaito. But when he sheepishly reached out and grasped Kaito's fingers, the real Kaito clenched his fists tight as though to squeeze back.

And with that, Kaito let out an internal bellow.

*DAMN RIGHT I DID!*

"I'd rather bear it a million times over than let you die!"

Then, at long last,

Kaito Sena snapped.



The Earl's Grand Guignol. The Governor's banquet. The Grand King's circus.

There was no shortage of things that had sparked Kaito's fury in the past.

However, because of his experiences from when he was alive, his emotions had a sort of built-in brake. Whenever he was about to succumb to his negative emotions, he quickly regained his calm. And the decisions he'd been able to make as a result of this trait had come in handy time and time again. But as a result, Kaito Sena had never truly snapped.

Yet now, he'd gone well, truly, and completely off the rails.

All the common sense, reason, and composure in his brain had evaporated away into nothing.

Taken over completely by rage, Kaito snapped his fingers. Six blades, the most he'd ever been able to summon, began whirling above his head. At times, strong emotions, even negative ones, could grant people abnormal bursts of power. His anger had surpassed its limits, and a new image welled up within Kaito.

Then Kaito shouted, his eyes open as wide as they would go.

*"La (transform)."*

The blades lay atop one another, then merged into one. They melted like sugar, writhing as they took on a new form.

A jet-black long sword hung in the air. Then it plunged straight down, directly into the earth.

Kaito snatched it up by the handle as though selfishly claiming it for himself. Perhaps he'd been unconsciously mimicking Executioner's Sword of Frankenthal, as azure runes glittered across its blade.

*All things are pardoned unto me. But I am ruled by none.*

After flashing once atop the jet-black blade, the runes faded away.

Still holding its handle, Kaito called out the sword's name, as though the weapon itself were speaking through him.

*"Nameless."*

Then he swung his black blade down, cleaving through the air and leveling its tip toward Elisabeth.

She responded by snapping her fingers. All the torture devices vanished.

Only Executioner's Sword of Frankenthal remained.

The two of them faced each other, silently. Then they dashed in unison.

Unlike when she'd fought against the King's replica, Elisabeth didn't resort to underhanded tactics.

Executioner's Sword of Frankenthal and Nameless collided.

The blow they'd exchanged was head-on.





For a brief moment, a torrent of sparks shot out. Without even pausing to step back, they swung their swords again. Due to the point-blank range, swordsmanship played essentially no role in their fight. It had devolved into a simple slugfest. But if either failed to block so much as a single blow, it would no doubt prove fatal. Such was the savagery of the blows they were trading.

Under normal circumstances, neither would have been able to let up for even a moment. Despite that fact, though, they exchanged shouts as well as slashes.

"Screw your promise to the people! Screw your oath! Sure, I know about that! Hell, I've seen the mountains of corpses you've made with my own damn eyes! There's no way you can atone for the sins you've committed! Well, tough shit! The Torture Princess deserves to be put to the stake! But what about me?! What's gonna happen to the guy you saved, huh?!"

"'Tis hardly my concern! Go live out your second life as you please! Live strong and stand on your own! Why, you even have a wife! Is there no limit to your greed?!"

"Now who's spouting bullshit?! I'm not the only one! You're just gonna ignore all those people you helped, Elisabeth, all those people you saved, and go off and burn at the stake?! That isn't right! *You didn't save us just so we could watch you go get killed!* Screw that! There's no way I'm gonna let things end like this!"

Kaito swung his sword like a madman. His cries and his attacks were in sync, and he succeeded in pushing Elisabeth back just a hair. She and her sword were forced back as one. Yet still, she responded to his cries and his blows in kind.

"'Tis naught but your own selfishness speaking!"

*"The hell's wrong with me selfishly choosing to put you above the world?!"*

Kaito's words were firm and resolute. Elisabeth bit her lips. Then they swung their swords once more, each imbuing their strike with the full weight of their fury. A loud clanging noise rang out as sword collided with sword. The two blades grated against each other.

As he gazed at their relentless battle, one of the paladins let out a vague murmur.

"I don't get it. They're clearly fighting to the death, but..."

...but if anything, it looked more like a simple quarrel.

His words were lost on the two fighters, though, their cries reaching fever pitches as metal grated on metal.

"I died, you know! I lived a worthless, joyless life, and then I died! But because you saved me from that, you're more important to me than the whole world put together! So I don't give a shit! I don't give a shit about the stuff you've done! Here, Elisabeth, here's what I should've said from the very beginning: For my sake, let me save you!"

"Your arguments made little sense from the start, and now your words are no different! Surely, you know such a trifling reason hardly merits rejecting another's pride, let alone rejecting their lifelong oath!"

"Sure I know that, but that doesn't change what I have to do!"

"This is absurd! The whole situation is an absolute mess! The Butcher, 'salvation,' the imminent end of the world, nonsensical matters keep piling up left and right!

"Yeah! And the whole deal about the first demon's flesh!"

"Hmm?"

"Huh?"

And then, as though a pin had dropped, the two of them came to an abrupt stop.

They each stared at the other, then exchanged quizzical looks. Then, gathering strength in their swords, they each leaped back, before finally surveying their surroundings.

Hina was standing by, waiting, and she looked to be on the verge of tears. The paladins had simply been watching the fight in a daze. And in the back, Jeanne still stood beside Izabella, who had been struggling against the machine's arm the entire time.

As expressionless as always, albeit with the corners of her lips turned up just a smidge, Jeanne spoke.

"Well? Are you two finished with your little lovers' spat?"

"'It's not a lovers' spat!'"

Kaito and Elisabeth shouted their protests in unison.

And that was how, at long last, the two of them finally settled down enough to talk.



"Now that you mention it, there does seem to be some inscrutable little golden lass here, and the Church's orders were decidedly enigmatic. Kaito... to what end did you come here?"

"The gold girl's name is Jeanne, but it'd take forever to explain her whole story. I asked her where the first bit of demon flesh came from, and she said she'd show me."

"The Butcher said much the same—that by coming here, many things would become clear. Explaining that would prove lengthy as well, though."

They looked at each other anew, then fell silent. After a while, Elisabeth heaved a heavy sigh. Violently mussing up her bangs, she clicked her tongue in irritation.

"I haven't forgiven you, mind. Nor do I have any intention of doing so hereafter. But it seems a short ceasefire is in order. There are matters we ought to clear up before resolving our conflict."

"Yeah, you can say that again."

Kaito and Elisabeth both nodded. As they did, they sensed someone quickly trot up to them.

They both quickly whirled to the side.

When they did, they found Hina standing there. She was silent, instead merely gazing at the two of them with her big, round, emerald eyes. Upon seeing her meaningful, teary gaze, both Kaito and Elisabeth found themselves slightly taken aback.

Eventually, Kaito smiled to try to set her mind at ease, then extended his hand to her.

“C’mere, Hina.”

Hina took it and squeezed it tight. Then she turned toward Elisabeth. Elisabeth met her gaze with a curt, puzzled frown. Before long, though, Hina’s puppy-dog eyes beat her down, and she held out her hand as well.

“All right, all right. Go on, then. But you mustn’t forget. This is but a temporary...truce...”

Not waiting for Elisabeth to finish her sentence, Hina took Elisabeth’s hand firmly in hers. Based on her expression, Elisabeth was at something of a loss. Hina was still silent. She simply squeezed their two hands with all her might.

As she did, a troubled voice rang out from the background.







"Stop this! Unhand me at once! What is the meaning of this?! Am I being taken prisoner?! Even if that's the case, surely there must be a better way to transport me!"

"Please settle down, miss. You had things you wanted to know, didn't you? And with me kidnapping you like this, you even have a pretext."

"But that's..."

Kaito turned to look behind him. Deus Ex Machina had taken on a humanoid form and was carrying Izabella bridal-style. It looked almost affectionate at first glance, but its metal fingers were holding her firmly in place.

When she'd heard Jeanne's quiet cajolery, Izabella's expression had wavered. However, she was still nobly pursing her lips, no doubt trying to force out words of protest. Before she could, though, Jeanne went on.

**"And one other thing. It ain't often my buddy here takes a liking to someone, ya feel? You're gonna wanna settle down there, li'l lady. You wouldn't want one of those hard *bits* to *shlick* into someplace weird, wouldja?"**

Upon hearing Jeanne's extreme tone shift, Izabella froze up again. Apparently, her brain had decided to just give up. Not having heard their exchange, several of the paladins rushed over, planning on mounting a valiant rescue for their captured commander.

As she turned to face them, Jeanne cast a chilly glare their way.

"I'd stay there if I were you, misters, if you value your commander's life. **Who's a good boy? That's right, it's you, you filthy dogs!"**

The paladins obediently lowered their swords, and Jeanne gave them a nod. Then her honey-blond hair fluttered as she turned back toward Kaito. She began matter-of-factly giving out instructions.

"Summon Vlad, if you would. His presence will be helpful to explain things going forward."

"...I find it nearly impossible to tell if that girl is mad or not, you know."

"Yeah, tell me about it."

As he agreed with Elisabeth's impression, Kaito ran mana through the stone in his pocket. Azure rose petals and darkness swirled to life. As he elegantly crossed his legs in the empty air, Vlad made a displeased remark.

*"Good heavens. You forget those you've dragged along with you, then throw yourself into absurd situations time and time again. What a cruel, heartless state of affairs. And it's not even as if I greatly mind the treatment, but I had my doubts as to whether or not you'd survive."*

"Oh, right. I guess you were in my pocket that whole time."

*"I'd ask that you try to do a better job of remembering me, my dear successor. Why, I was even kind enough to avoid saying anything about that disappointing display you put on last night; one that anyone but that doll of yours would have been sorely disillusioned by... No, wait, stop that. Do be*

*so kind as to stop trying to smash me against the ground. You shan't hear another peep out of me, I swear."*

Vlad quickly shut up. As the Kaiser gave a deep, amused snort, Elisabeth tilted her head to the side in confusion. Hina, still clutching Kaito's and Elisabeth's hands, kept gently crying, and Izabella resumed her attempts to struggle free.

Jeanne looked at the whole ensemble. With the violent battle having finally come to an end, she made a loud declaration.

"Now then, the time is upon us—let us proceed and lay bare the secrets of this world."

Jeanne's gait as she walked was leisurely, as though nothing at all had happened.

Behind the whore claiming herself to be a saint of salvation, the enemy of the world, his bride, a peerless sinner, the commander of the Holy Knights, a demon, and the demon's old contractor followed after.

The seven of them strode onward, to the site the Church had worked so hard to keep hidden.

They strode into the underground tomb, where the kings of old were interred.



# 8

## Ends and Beginnings

F r e e m d T o r t u r e h e a n





## 8

### Ends and Beginnings

The interior of the underground tomb was made from materials Kaito was wholly unfamiliar with. Also, there were a number of seals placed on it. If they weren't properly undone by a devout follower of God, they would likely prove fatal. But Jeanne, who was practically the poster girl for atheism, successfully unraveled them one after another.

*"Pray for the sacrifices. Think of the sacrifices. Believe in the sacrifices. Come forth, O tears of my people, O lives of my people."*

Snapping her fingers, Jeanne caused a number of gemstones to appear out of thin air.

Each time she encountered a seal, she placed one atop it at a carefully selected location, then shattered the seal with ease.

Kaito wasn't sure what the trick to it was, but the feat's eccentricity was abundantly clear. As he gazed at Jeanne in wonderment, she turned to him and nodded.

"I can see you're feeling embarrassed about your own incompetence upon seeing how marvelous I am, mister. And I can sympathize with that. But you needn't feel shame over the fact that you're **generally worth less than shit**. This is what the alchemists who created me, who served me, and who died for me stored and refined their mana for, after all."

"I mean, I'm not gonna deny that I thought it was impressive, but..."

*"No, my dear successor, it goes far past the level of 'impressive.' Burn this sight into your eyes—it will undoubtably make for a valuable reference."*

Vlad floated up to a spot beside Kaito, casting his gaze toward the upcoming barrier.

The way he then nodded in heartfelt admiration was both unusual and more than a little uncanny.

*"I bought demon flesh from the Butcher, but even I knew nothing of this place. I must admit, I'm quite impressed. They've laid out one first-rate barrier after another. Without an entire clan spending generations burning up their lives and knowledge, breaking in would prove nigh impossible. No mere graves require such protection. What on earth might they be hiding within?"*

The Kaiser, who was standing beside him, scoffed. For the last little while, he'd been duly playing the part of the canine and sniffing all over their surroundings. Then, with a displeased look on his face, he let out a sneeze and shook his body all over.



*"Hmph, what on earth indeed. This place was not built for man. An arrogant odor permeates its walls. It's the odor of mice, scurrying about as they try to receive blessings from a likeness of God... But the odor has a somewhat nostalgic bearing to it as well. Whatever could it mean?"*

The Kaiser resumed his sniffing. But it seemed answers still evaded him. He continued following the smell, and Kaito and the others quickly went after him.

As they went down the corridor, they passed by a number of rooms, each one boasting a self-contained mausoleum.

Each doorway was adorned with stone flowers, and within every one lay an imposing coffin. Luxurious decorations and statues stood guard around the coffins, each set based on anecdotes and tales from the lives of their corresponding kings.

As she glanced at each mausoleum out of the corner of her eye, Izabella let out a strained voice.

"Oh, to defile the graves of the kings of old... I am unfit to serve as a commander."

Still bound by Deus Ex Machina's steel arms, she went as pale as a sheet. If they left her like that, she was liable to end up mentally scarred.

*W-we should probably do something to help alleviate her guilt...*

And they needed to explain things to Elisabeth as well. With those two thoughts in mind, Kaito decided to lay out everything he knew while he walked.

"There's some stuff you guys should probably hear. Here's what's been going on up to now..."

Jeanne, who was the original source of most of his information, offered no interjections. She merely hummed in a strangely mechanical fashion.

As she heard Kaito's story, Izabella's face stiffened for a whole new reason.

"Paladins made to eat demon flesh, you say? That can't be... But I certainly can't deny the existence of a squad I'd never heard of... And there were inconsistencies in the number of people listed as having died defending the Capital..."

Izabella began muttering to herself. She'd clearly had prior inklings that something was amiss.

As Izabella lost herself in her thoughts, a dangerous crimson glare flashed across Elisabeth's face.

"A second, artificially made Torture Princess, you say? The Butcher did mention something about people working to prevent some event from occurring... You mean to tell me that this girl is the result of that?"

The black, naturally made Torture Princess cast a glance at her golden counterpart's back. Jeanne offered no answer, of course. Elisabeth, not offering much in the way of words to Jeanne, either, continued speaking.

"So the Church bolstered their strength by forcing paladins to consume demon flesh, then made an attempt on Jeanne's life. Jeanne's efforts were



obstructing the Church's work, then. But what was their goal, and what was hers? The Butcher spoke of this as well..."

After hearing Elisabeth's story, Kaito narrowed his eyes as he thought back over what she'd just said.

*"I'd never thought someone would rise to oppose the dreadful end of the story that the fourteen tragedies mark the beginning of. Though your two tales may be small in the scope of things, the results they bear may be monumental indeed," huh.*

Kaito pictured a large chessboard in his mind.

The board was the world. The Butcher's schemes and Vlad's avarice had placed fourteen demonic pawns atop it. But although the pawns had been successfully destroyed, large cracks and fissures had spread across the board.

Now, the Church's new, twisted pawns were facing off against a white queen.

The crimson king and queen, who'd been fighting up until then, were currently floating off to the side.

The Butcher had described the two of them as irregularities. He and Elisabeth had carried out their role, which was to defeat the fourteen demons, but supposedly, their efforts had had little effect on the battle at large. Now, though, they had an opportunity to play an even greater part.

*Something's been thrown into motion, but what? Or, no, maybe it was set into motion a long time ago.*

Kaito's head ached, and he pressed his fingers against his forehead. Then he gazed at the honey locks before him.

There was no doubt in his mind that of all the people present, Jeanne was standing closest to the truth. But she still wasn't saying anything. Continuing to hum, she shattered the next seal with a pearl-gray stone.

The group descended a set of stairs. With each floor they went down, the seals blocking their path grew in strength.

Then Izabella let out a dumbfounded cry.

"What is the meaning of this? The tomb is only supposed to have five floors!"

The sixth floor wasn't supposed to exist, but it stood before them regardless, the barrier guarding it more colorful and bombastic than the others. No king was interred there, that much was clear. The room should have been empty, yet its barrier was strong enough to take out a hundred underlings in an instant.

Kaito was concerned—would Jeanne really be able to break through it? But Jeanne's voice when she spoke was light, a stark contrast to her steely face.

**"That's some baby crap. Your shit's softer than silk, you crazy fucks. If you wanted to protect it, you shoulda put your lives on the line. We used up an entire goddamn clan; how's that for crazy?"**

And then, as though she were trashing a child's secret hideout, Jeanne destroyed it.

The stairwell they descended seemed to go on forever.

At the end of it, though, they arrived at a massive door.

An image of the Saint had been expertly carved on its surface. However, she didn't look the same as the myriad times Kaito had seen her before.

There was one key difference between it and the statues of her hung upside down that he was familiar with.

Dumbfounded, Kaito let out a murmur.

"...She's standing."

Her feet were planted firmly on the ground. And she didn't appear to be in any pain, either. A demi-human apostle was kneeling before her. Jeanne held a red jewel over the Saint's eye, and the stone melted away, as though extreme heat had been applied to it.

As it did, red light flashed across the entire door like lightning.

Bloody tears began pouring from the Saint's eyes. Then the door opened on its own, creaking, as it slowly revealed the interior of the room.

And when it did, a bizarre voice rang out from inside.

It was like a monster, screaming.

It was like a human, moaning.

"...What is that thing?"

"A guardian the Grave Keeper created."

Jeanne replied coolly to Izabella's shocked question. But no matter how one looked at it, the thing sitting in the middle of the room hardly looked like a "guardian" of any sort.

It was a snowy owl fused with strangely swollen blobs of flesh.

The owl's head was glowing white and giving off a holy aura. It resembled the beasts La Mules had summoned. But its bottom half was made up of repulsively intertwined feelers. The aura they gave off was sinister.

If that thing was really a human's creation, then they'd clearly done something horribly taboo. Izabella let out a horrified murmur.

"That...that can't... The Grave Keeper couldn't have... Not something like that..."

Its wet feelers were spread and buried throughout the room, like roots on a tree. And they were pulsating.

The Kaiser let out a deep growl, then spoke in a furious roar.

*"This is no laughing matter... This, too, is blasphemy; blasphemy against the very nature of demons! Vlad, do you see this? Why does that thing have the vile head of one of God's messengers?"*

*"How brilliant. They borrowed God's power, summoned one of His beasts, then forced it to eat demon flesh. A triumph of the imagination."*

Vlad was barely paying attention to the Kaiser. His voice with thick with ecstasy.

Izabella opened her eyes wide, utterly aghast. Her cheeks quivered. She was barely keeping herself from screaming, her heart clearly racked by despair and an overwhelming feeling of emptiness.

Kaito could understand a little of what she was feeling.

*That thing's existence violates the very foundation of her beliefs.*

A monster, formed from a divine creation being forced to eat demon flesh, was sitting within the underground tomb that the Church had been protecting.

It represented a complete and utter betrayal of everything the people believed in.

"A—a question, if I may. Are you, in fact, a messenger of God?"

In an impressive display of rationality, Izabella called out to the snowy owl. Then, still trembling, she continued.

"U-under what beliefs d-do you guard this—"

The owl whirled its head around in the unique manner owls do and stared directly at them. When it did, Izabella choked on her words. Kaito gulped as well.

The owl's eyes were gold, as big as dinner plates, and utterly filled with madness.

Like a missionary dispensing doctrine, Jeanne explained the monster's condition.

"Those who eat demon flesh obtain great power but must in exchange offer the pain of others to their body as compensation. Just like myself and the black Torture Princess, the monster before us has likely obtained sufficient pain to maintain its body. But God's power and Diablo's power repel each other. Its mind and body were unable to maintain the mental and physical strain, bringing about this warped transformation. All that remains of it is the desire to destroy everything its eyes chance upon. **A handy watchdog, ain't it! One of them real 'abandon hope, all ye who enter' types!**"

For the last bit, Jeanne's voice was ringing with ridicule. Taking that as their cue, the feelers throughout the room began writhing with animosity. The unpleasant sound of mucus slapping against mucus echoed out.

Izabella covered her scarred face with one hand, then shook her head from side to side again and again.

"This is mad... This is utter, utter madness! Why does something like that exist? Why is it here, in the underground royal tomb? Just what is it we believed in? What exactly have we been protecting?!"

"Lift up your head, miss. There are many good and proper things you've protected, you know. But you noticed, didn't you? Even just a little? Something was gradually going askew. But you foolishly averted your eyes. This is the price you pay for your blindness."

Jeanne's voice once more took on the ring of a priest giving a lecture. She mercilessly continued her dignified remonstrance.

"Look closely and behold. Why do you think I led a stray sheep like you here, O representative of humanity? You are a leader, though perhaps only in name."

"Yes...you're right. So I am. So...I was."

Biting her lip so hard that she drew blood, Izabella looked back up. Tears were spilling down from her eyes.

With those same eyes, she focused her vision on the monster whose very existence she would just as soon have denied.

The snowy owl began moving in earnest. Its massive head spun as it glided forward. Dragged along by its upper half, its mass of feelers moved as well. For a moment, Kaito felt as though the entire room had charged forward. That was just how extensive its writhing, mucus-covered flesh was.

"Master Kaito."

"On it."

Kaito, accompanied by Hina, tried to take a step forward. However, he could have spared himself the effort.

The loud, high-pitched noise of heels clicked and echoed throughout the room.

The black Torture Princess and the golden Torture Princess had stepped forward first.

The two of them stood side by side. Then, as though they were mirrored reflections of each other, they raised opposite hands. Darkness and light swirled atop their palms as they fearlessly faced down their sacred, profane, hideous foe.

Crimson and gold flower petals danced. White light and black darkness spun.

One spoke with naked fury, and the other emotionlessly murmured.

"Just die already!"

"Good night, slave."

The next moment, the crimson, gold, black, and white exploded. The Torture Princesses weren't relying on their torture devices and machines. Not fearing the onrushing feelers in the slightest, the two of them were firing off swords directly.





*Thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk!*

Thousands of swords designed for decapitation impaled the snowy owl through its body. It looked like a living pincushion.

Opening its beak, it let out a miserable, throaty voice.

*"Ahhhhhhh, ahhhhhhh, AHHHHHHH, aHhHhHhH."*

Its voice was neither avian nor monstrous. It was the voice of a human. As he heard that, a terrible possibility welled up within Kaito's mind.

*The birds La Mules summoned vanished right away.*

Why, then, had the owl before them not?

Perhaps, in order to secure the summoned beast to this world, they'd mixed a human in as well. That was the horrible suspicion Kaito had. But between his sentimentality and his revulsion, he had no space left to thoroughly examine that possibility.

*"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"*

The scream went up in pitch, rising nearly to the level of a shriek. After forcing her way out of Deus Ex Machina's arms, Izabella hit the ground running. Then, upon crashing into the sword-ridden owl, she grabbed the handle of one sword buried particularly deep in the bird's chest and twisted it.

The snowy owl screamed even more violently. As it did, Izabella wrenched the sword free.

A horrible squelching noise resounded throughout the chamber. Dark blood gushed from the wound and ran across the floor.

The sword had been puncturing the owl's pulsating heart.

Its massive eyes still as wide as dinner plates, the owl convulsed. Its head and torso began transforming into white light, and the feelers comprising the rest of its body turned into black feathers. Halfway through, though, both transformations stopped.

Its tragic corpse then toppled to the ground, the right to even vanish as a demon or a holy creature taken from it.

Izabella was drenched in blood. The sword clanged against the ground as she dropped it, and when she looked up, her face was trembling. For a second, it looked like she was going to collapse. But she managed to right her footing with willpower alone.

She then placed her arm horizontally over her chest and gave a bow.

*"No longer must you be bound by the chains of your tortured existence. Your efforts guarding the tomb did not go unnoticed."*

That was the dedication she gave to the monster. Nobody else said a thing.

As though it were accepting her words, the man-made monster drifted into its eternal slumber. Its feelers stopped twitching. After confirming that fact, Izabella toppled to the ground.

Then she broke into a silent sob.

She cried and she cried, as though trying to parse the absurdity of it all and change it all into rage.



A massive pool of blood spread through the room. Izabella sat motionless in it.

“Hey, Izabella...”

Kaito called out to her in hopes of comforting her. But before he could finish, the light sound of footsteps splashing echoed through the room.

Jeanne had approached Izabella with an easy, almost dance-like gait. To everyone’s surprise, she spun forward and wrapped Izabella up in a tight hug. Izabella’s eyes went wide.

Jeanne’s expression was as cold as always, but her embrace was warm and kind.

**“I knew I liked ya for a reason, li’l lady. Fools demonstrating their pride is not so unpleasant a thing. You got a backbone on ya.”**

Using her own pale hand, Jeanne wiped the blood off Izabella’s face. After wiping away the filth, she stroked Izabella’s scarred skin as she went on speaking.

“Their weakness is precisely what drives the foolish to be strong. That was the ideal you were striving toward, miss. **You’re a good kid.**”

Upon hearing the gentle words, Izabella blinked several times. But she didn’t have a chance to reply. Deus Ex Machina scooped her up in its arms once again.

“No, I... This again?”

Izabella tried to resist. But a moment later, she wearily let her body go limp. She seemed to have given up and was now obediently allowing herself to be carried.

Standing up herself, Jeanne raised her bloody hands.

“Come now, just a little farther—how *exciting*.”

Kaito cast another glance around the room.

He hadn’t noticed at first due to the feelers covering it, but the room was constructed like a large hall. To his alarm, the walls didn’t seem to have any joints or seams on them, and a number of delicate crystalline lamps hung from the room’s hemispherical ceiling.







*Was this room really made by people?*

Kaito found that fact dubious. At the same time, he realized that the room offered no way for them to advance. He couldn't see any hallways or stairs branching off it. It was a dead end.

The one thing he did see, though, was a deep carving in one of the stone wall's sections that had been covered up by feelers. The carving's craftsmanship was so impressive that the person depicted seemed to be alive.

Kaito walked up to it. The Saint was embracing something swaddled in cloth, but it was impossible to see what lay within. What was clear, though, was the Saint's benevolent smile. A demi-human attendant was standing beside her.

His face was cast in shadow, concealed by his hood. Kaito let out a dazed whisper.

"...The Butcher?"

Putting the dots together, Kaito thought back to the statue he'd seen in the Capital's plaza.

A statue of the Saint shedding tears of blood had been installed next to Godd Deos's headquarters. And in front of her had been another statue, a kneeling apostle wrapped from the head down in tattered rags. Surprisingly, the apostle had been a demi-human. Legs with scales engraved in them and sharp claws had peeked out from the bottom edge of the rags.

He'd looked as though he was both rejoicing in and lamenting the Saint's suffering.

Absentmindedly, Kaito reached out to touch the engraving. Before his hand reached it, though, someone grabbed him by the wrist.

Elisabeth had been the one to stop him. She spoke, her voice cold.

"Do you have a death wish? Go on, then—touch it. Not even ash will remain."

"Oh. Uh, my bad."

Kaito narrowed his eyes and appraised the amount of mana stored in the wall. Elisabeth had been completely right.

It was hard to tell at just a glance, but the entire wall was covered in a fiendish barrier. Anyone who touched it would probably have their very existence annihilated. But then he tilted his head to the side in puzzlement.

There was something odd about the mana the barrier was giving off.

*It's the same here...good and evil mixed together.*

Sacred mana blended together with malicious mana, sealing the wall up firmly.

It was at that moment that Kaito realized something.

"Wait, this thing isn't designed to *protect* something, is it?"

Something was hidden there. Or perhaps it was sealed away there. That was the impression Kaito had gotten.

*But...what?*

His ominous premonitions worsened as he carefully looked back over the mana and the general vibe the wall was giving off. Then he realized that there was something lurking on the other side of the sturdy wall.

*What...what is that? Is that a noise I hear?*

Kaito strained his ears, taking great care not to touch the wall. After a moment, he realized what the nature of the noise was. Something was breathing, inhaling and exhaling at a steady, fixed rhythm.

Something was sleeping back there.

Like a child, taking a calm, tranquil nap.

"Now then, today shall be a day worth commemorating. Let us unveil the secret within."

There wasn't a tinge of fear in Jeanne's voice. She opened her palms wide. A black jewel sat atop one, a white jewel atop the other. When she pressed them together, they merged into one, then transformed into the shape of a key. Once they had, Jeanne thrust it into the face of whatever it was the Saint was holding.

*—Grgrahhh.*

As the strange noise rang out, Jeanne gave a sweet, gentle whisper.

"Beyond that wall lies the true source of the flesh we ate."

Apparently, the groaning noise from a moment ago had indicated it was now unlocked. The hefty wall began shifting, creaking and kicking up dust as it went. Like a chastity belt dropping, the Church's revolting, long-kept secret was laid bare.

Beyond the hefty wall  
sat a child's bedroom.



It was quiet inside.

The deep, deep silence within felt as though it had lasted centuries, if not millennia.

At first glance, it didn't look like anything besides a room for a normal child, its walls decorated with wallpaper and ribbons. It was a harmless, charming little room. But a second glance would reveal the room's dark, twisted nature.

There were human faces sprouting from the wallpaper in place of a floral design. All of them were wordlessly writhing. Although they had no vocal cords, their mouths were contorted into silent, anguished screams.

As for the ribbons hanging overhead, they were made from various types of human entrails, dangling from the stomachs of people suspended in the air. And given their vivid hues, the owners were still alive.

And in the center of that grotesque, pain-adorned room sat a massive cradle.

It seemed almost cruel how pure a shade of white it was, the only unsullied object in the room.

Within it, *something* was sleeping.

Whatever it was, human vocabulary was ill equipped to describe it.

It was alive. It was in deep slumber. It had flesh.

If someone wished to describe it in words, that would have to be enough.

"That there is the first demon—a far higher entity than the fourteen who descended after it, and a being with the power to shatter the world's very foundations."

Though she faced a horror that surpassed human comprehension, Jeanne's speech was dispassionate. Kaito found himself at a loss for words.

*That thing isn't supposed to exist in this world.*

He thought back to the exposition Elisabeth had given him right after he'd reincarnated.

*"We call the entity who created the world 'God' and that which destroys it 'Diablo.' Hence, Diablo can only interfere with the world of man once God has abandoned it. But there is an exception. If Diablo has a contractor, then all bets are off.*

*"But summoning Diablo, who possesses enough power to destroy the entire world, is no small feat, and there is no one vessel who can contain it, so it has yet to manifest."*

That was how things were supposed to be, yet there could be no mistaking the fact that Diablo, who held enough power to destroy the entire world, was sleeping before them.

The Kaiser said nothing, his thoughts inscrutable. A sublime smile was plastered across Vlad's face. Hina was making no efforts to hide her revulsion, and Izabella was wearing the expression of a child who'd just been struck by a parent.

*Something that shouldn't exist, exists.*

Faced with that irreconcilable contradiction, Kaito felt a wave of vertigo. Elisabeth shook her head from side to side as she cast a sidelong glance his way. Then, with a displeased look on her face, she posed a question to Jeanne.

"Without a contractor, Diablo should be unable to manifest in this world. Who, then, is this thing's contractor? My power is all but supreme, and not even my body could withstand such a feat. Nor is it possible for Vlad, nor the Grand King, nor you. The vessel would shatter. No man should be qualified."

"That isn't the case, though. A person with such power does exist, a person that even the stray sheep are familiar with."

Jeanne's answer bordered on singsong.

Kaito and Elisabeth furrowed their brows. If such a person really existed, they'd have to be a pretty big deal. Ignoring their doubts, though, Jeanne launched into a seemingly unrelated story.

"The Saint manifested God through her body, saved the world, then fell into an eternal slumber. Because of that, it can be said the world of man was built atop her suffering, her devotion, and her sacrifice. That forms the basis of the Church's doctrine. But therein lies a contradiction. The Saint manifested God through her body and rebuilt the world. In that case, though, *who was the one who destroyed it?*"

"...That would be Diablo, naturally. No. Wait."

Elisabeth covered her mouth. Kaito, too, noticed the contradiction.

*"Diablo can only interfere with the world of man once God has abandoned it."*

If that was the case, then the Saint shouldn't have been able to manifest God. After all, once God abandoned the world, then as one of his creations, she, too, would have been a target for destruction.

The mystery had been dangling right in front of everyone's noses, yet none of them had even noticed it.

The world had been saved once. But what had happened right before that?

"Exactly, miss. Normally, there's no way that God could have responded to a human's summons and dwelled within their body. All humans would have been destroyed the moment he abandoned the world, after all. In other words, *the order is backward.*"

"...Backward?"

"Even though God had yet to renounce the world, Diablo destroyed it anyway. That was why God appeared in response to a human's summons, and that was why He rebuilt it. The girl who carried God within her body, the girl who wasn't destroyed, was the only person left in the world. But if she could summon God, she would also have been able to form a contract with a demon of equal power. In other words..."

The chains on Jeanne's wrists rattled and jingled as she raised one index finger in front of her lips.

Then, as though she were telling them a secret, she divulged the truth that had been hidden for so long.

"First, the girl formed a contract with the mighty Diablo. While it's unclear what her objective was, she was unable to maintain control and ended up destroying the world. In her regret, she summoned God, formed a contract with Him, and rebuilt the world. But she was unable to endure her two contracts, nor was she able to die, so instead, she fell into a deep slumber. That is what it all means."

And in that moment, one of the fundamental doctrines underpinning human society crumbled at its very foundation.

A crack formed in Izabella's expression. But Jeanne didn't stop, instead making one last declaration.

"The Suffering Saint, the one venerated by the Church, is none other than the first demon's contractor."

And because of that, the Church had hidden away the first demon, the one she'd called forth.

The alchemists must have obtained its flesh before its existence had been covered up. Then, knowing it would one day awaken, they went into hiding and began preparing countermeasures. And for some reason, the Saint's apostle, the Butcher, had bided his time before giving the demon's flesh to those wishing to form contracts.

Kaito and Elisabeth thought back on what the Butcher had told her.

*"It's a nonsensical little fairy tale, and one that's gone on for a very, very long time."*

*"There are those who've worked to bring these events about, and those who've worked to prevent them."*

"In the course of the slaying of the fourteen demons, the chessboard sustained heavy damage. The upper echelons of the Church, a number of their fanatics, and some of those who wish to escape the burden of having to restore the Capital seek to awaken the first demon, expand the destruction, and in doing so, urge God to rebuild the world. They believe that when the destroyed world is restored, the righteous devotees will remain."

"There's no way. That line of thinking is way too optimistic."

Kaito replied, his voice cold. Of all the people present, his knowledge pool was the shallowest. But despite that, he was confident in his assertion. Ever since he'd seen La Mules firsthand, he'd known.

God created the world, and Diablo destroyed it. That was all there was to their respective existences.

The fact remained that neither was an entity man was meant to interact with.

"Yes, very much so. Rebuilding is the act of blotting out the current painting, then drawing a new one atop it."

Jeanne reaffirmed Kaito's sentiments. Kaito envisioned the scene in his mind.

People were frolicking atop a massive canvas and painting a picture. But now, warped fissures ran across the painting. Then someone sitting in front of the canvas abruptly picked up a brush.

And the first thing they did was paint over the picture with black.

"If a new world is born, then all humanity with the exception of the Saint, the painter, will perish. I was created to prevent that. But my knowledge of the common world is lacking. The alchemists lacked the power to accompany me, instead choosing to die and become my nourishment, but their final request to me was that I made sure I found suitable servants."

After having heard what Jeanne had to say, Kaito was now keenly aware of the difference between Jeanne's "salvation" and the Church's. One side wanted to preserve the world as it was, and the other wanted to build the world anew.

*I still don't know what motive the Butcher had for selling demon flesh, though.*

No matter what reason he may have had, though, the seeds of evil he'd planted had successfully borne fourteen demonic fruits.

And he'd described Kaito and Elisabeth's resistance as "unexpected."

Not knowing that the stage they'd been fighting atop had been prepared long before, the two of them had taken up the sword and fought. Countless people had died in the course of their desperate resistance. But apparently, their efforts had changed nothing.

Right now, the final flower was trying to bloom. And Jeanne was trying to nip it in the bud.

Then the maiden of salvation who proclaimed herself the saint and the whore gave her haughty continuation.

"Now, dear Lovers, you understand the truth, and the gravity of the situation. Kaito Sena. Elisabeth Le Fanu. I know that the two of you are destined to fight each other to the death. But now you must throw that all away and serve me as faithful slaves."

She turned her rosy gaze directly on the two of them.

And when she did, Jeanne de Rais, the artificial Torture Princess, went on as though it were only natural.

"At this rate, our world will be destroyed, and not so much as a trace will remain."

Her words rang out through the chamber like a final verdict.



## Afterword

Hello, Keishi Ayasato here.

We've finally arrived at Volume 4.

Thank you all so much for buying the fourth volume of *Torture Princess*.

The new Torture Princess has finally arrived, and we've entered a new chapter of the story.

A number of the world's secrets were all revealed at once this time—what did you all think? The upcoming twists and developments will build right off the big events that just happened, so I suspect things will continue on at a nonstop pace from here on out, too. To tell you the truth, I'm actually working on Volume 5 as I write this afterword, and I'm planning on pounding out page after page after page, so please look forward to the story's continuation. Also, I had the rare chance to write an extremely lovey-dovey scene in this book, which was a lot of fun. I hope we meet again in the next volume, where you can find out, among other things, if the two of them are able to continue enjoying their filthy normie lives.

Oh, and while we're on the subject of *Torture Princess*, it was fortunate enough to receive a manga adaptation!

The wonderful Hina Yamato is in charge of the adaptation, and it's being serialized by ComicWalker and Nico Nico Seiga. Elisabeth is more beautiful than ever, and the Knight's underling and Iron Maiden are drawn in such detail and with such impact. I'm filled to the brim with gratitude. Hina Yamato is such a skillful craftswoman, and the manga was so wonderful that I found myself engrossed to the point where I read through the whole thing in one sitting. It would make me oh-so-very happy if you all checked it out.

The official Twitter account, @goumonhime, is also up, so please take a look at that as well.

In addition to the manga adaptation, I was given the privilege of writing a series of short stories. At the time of this writing, *Chapter 1: Kaito's Daily Routine (Frontside)* just came out. And if there's a *Frontside*, there must, of course, be a *Backside* as well. In it, I decided to take a look at the daily lives of Kaito, Hina, Elisabeth, and the other characters. It's coming out alongside Hina Yamato's manga adaptation, so I hope you all look forward to it. It's going to be a heartwarming story, but perhaps a little disquieting as well. And as always, Ms. Ukai drew a beautiful illustration for it! Truly, it's a feast for the eyes!

Back when I was in *Torture Princess*'s planning stages, I never dreamed it would become a mixed-media franchise. I'm so deeply grateful for these unexpected opportunities I've been receiving. All this is thanks to Ms. Ukai, Ms. Hina Yamato, my editor O, my designer, everyone involved on the

publishing and the mixed-media sides of things, and above all else, all of you readers. Not a day goes by where I don't feel thankful. The only way I can think of to repay you is to write the most interesting stories I possibly can, so I plan to keep working as hard as I can. I'm going to give it my all!

And as always, thanks to my family for all your support. And I'll sneak in an extra big thanks for my sister, who always gives me advice when I need it most.

And one last giant thanks to my readers!

It brings me such happiness to have my story read by so many people and in so many ways, both through novels and through manga. I'm going to go full speed ahead on the future volumes, so I hope you all look forward to it.

And on that note, I pray we will reunite someday.

As the world's skin peels back,

the story will continue until it reaches its end.



Fremd Torhurchen



## Thus, He Spoke

He dreamed.

A dream of long, long ago.

He was being held up in a pair of warm, white arms.

From the moment he was created, he had been complete.

He was unseemly, and completely different from all other living creatures. Because of that, he'd never had a chance to rely on the assistance of another. He'd never had the body of an infant. So that was the first and final time in his long, long life that someone had ever held him.

Back when the world was yet white, he was the first thing they'd created.

No matter how long he lived, he would never forget what he'd seen as he first attained awareness in those slender arms.

It was but the faintest of memories, but it came to define the entire rest of his life.

It was the reason he'd accepted the demon flesh.

She'd appeared one day carrying a lump of something swaddled in red cloth. This was before she had ever shed tears of blood, or was hung upside down, or was spoken of far and wide.

She'd cast an affectionate smile toward the thing in the cloth, the kind one might offer to a baby.

Within it was a dark-crimson mound of flesh.

She was carrying demon flesh.

The moment he saw it, he grasped just how deep her madness and malice ran.

But when she passed it to him with the reverence one would have for their own child, he took it and held it tight. And even knowing how horrible it was, how profane it was, he protected it so as to pass it on to future generations.

Even knowing how wrong everything was becoming, that was the choice he made.

This is a story from long, long ago.

It is a tale too horrible to be called Genesis, too tragic.

That was why he chose to call it a fairy tale.

Despite the grand role he'd been assigned, he had no name.

She had never thought to give him one.

In his heart, he knew. He knew exactly how little he meant to her.

She felt no need to name him, nor even give him a nickname. She had no reason to call for him. As long as he acted as her apostle, that was all she needed from him.

After all, he was nothing more than another one of the seeds of evil she'd planted.

He was one of the seeds she'd buried away in the nooks and crannies of the paint-covered canvas. He wasn't even allowed to die of his own volition. That was how meager of an existence he was.

But even though he'd known that, he still took his order to heart and lived his life accordingly.

It was almost too long a time to be considered "life," however.

Even meaningless battles can lead to valuable encounters. In following with his other order, he fought to solidify human society and build a foundation for the circulation of goods.

The foundation of the Five Great Guilds brought a degree of peace to the land, but the battle against the Legend Dragon and the war over the rights to the Mana Egg were nevertheless fierce in the extreme.

There was also no shortage of people who named themselves in the same fashion as he, such as the Egg Seller and the Fishmonger, and they fought among themselves a great deal. But thanks to various turns of events, they helped give stability to the trade routes he'd pioneered.

He'd met countless people, and it was impossible to count all those he'd parted ways with.

They'd all been his friends, but in a much greater sense, they'd all just been his enemies. He'd run into people from all walks of life and shared drinks, songs, and journeys with them. Even though he was the world's enemy, he worked hard as a merchant to help it flourish.

Now, those bygone days seemed like they'd been mere fleeting phantoms of the past.

*Ah, the memories... Good heavens, though, I'm rather impressed I was able to sleep in a position such as this. Perhaps singing my own praises is gauche, but I suppose there's nobody left to listen anyways, is there?*

Having just opened his eyes inside the Gibbet, the Butcher found himself lost in idle thought.

Say, for instance, the five thousand men he'd had under his command.

Say, for instance, the ten thousand friends he'd made.

Say, for instance, the three people he'd held great affection for.

If someone were to ask him, "Did you ever find it painful, when you looked at them and saw how radiant they were?"

He would assuredly answer "No."

Just that one word. *No*.

He'd truly had fun along the way. And the joy it had brought him had been real as well.

Especially as of late—the days he'd spent in the castle he'd visited and surveyed had been exceptional. He'd grown fond of the little trio, and he'd really loved idly dropping by to make merry.

He enjoyed it when customers appreciated his goods, and it brought him joy to hear them espouse how delicious they were. He was sad when they got hurt, and thrilled when they thanked him.

But there was nothing more to it than that.

That was something the Butcher could say decisively.

"If Mr. Dim-Witted Servant were here, I'm sure he'd describe that as *sad*. What a good-hearted young man he is."

The Butcher muttered quietly to himself from within the Gibbet. He'd liked him so much that he'd given them a hand looking after the lovely automaton, even going so far as to lend her his strength.

The Butcher then skillfully shifted his weight, causing the cramped cage to rock. Its sturdy chain rattled and creaked. After giving up on that strategy, the Butcher looked out over the room. Not even scraps remained from his earlier feast.

According to Elisabeth, the troll arm had been dreadful. However, the rare slime-steak had been surprisingly palatable. The dragon tail, on the other hand, had been far too tough. It had gotten the worst reception of them all.

He'd had little reason to come out of his way and cook meat for the Torture Princess. Yet he had. And this was what had become of him. Even so, though, he had no regrets.

He didn't think of it as sad at all.

The time had always been coming, and now it had come. That was all there was to it.

"...For that is the type of creature I am, after all."

*All for you, my dear customers.*

*And all for one.*

He'd lived his life up until then by those two contradictory principles.

And in all likelihood, he'd keep doing so to the very end.

Say, for instance, the five thousand men he'd had under his command all died.

Say, for instance, the ten thousand friends he'd made all perished.

Say, for instance, the three people he'd held great affection for all went to their slumber furious.

If none of them ever smiled at him again,  
that would surely be painful.

But there had only ever been one moment in which his life had been given meaning.

"...Now then, as the enemy of the world, I suppose I'd best start acting the part."

Suddenly, the Butcher let out a murmur.

Then he spat out an intricately tangled wire from within the darkness of his hood. Then, still standing, he dislocated his wrist. With movements no human could have executed, he wriggled his limp arm and began using the wire to fiddle with the Gibbet's door.

Eventually, the lock clicked open.

For just a moment, the Butcher narrowed his eyes.

The moment he left would truly mark the beginning of the end.

He would have to start acting in a manner befitting the enemy of all that lived.

And for that reason, he let out a faint murmur.

"I thoroughly enjoyed myself, Madam Elisabeth, Ms. Lovely Maid, Mr. Dim-Witted Servant. That's as true as true can be. The living need fun in order to keep on living, after all. And when I watched you all fight back against it, you were truly, truly radiant. Even so..."

The Butcher threw the door open wide. His voice went low when he finally picked up where he'd left off.

"...Even so, the fairy tale must come to an end."

And then, with a *tap*,

the enemy of the world hopped down onto the stone floor.



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